

## Time After Time by freakazoid\_13

**Category:** Stranger Things (TV 2016)

**Genre:** M/M

**Language:** English

**Characters:** Eleven | Jane Hopper, Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Original Female Character(s), Original Male Character(s), Original Male Character(s) of Color, Will Byers

**Relationships:** Jonathan Byers/Original Female Character(s), Joyce Byers/Jim "Chief" Hopper, Will Byers & Mike Wheeler, Will Byers/Mike Wheeler, Will Byers/Original Male Character(s)

**Status:** Completed

**Published:** 2018-08-31

**Updated:** 2018-11-17

**Packaged:** 2022-04-23 03:02:15

**Rating:** Explicit

**Warnings:** No Archive Warnings Apply

**Chapters:** 13

**Words:** 63,552

**Publisher:** archiveofourown.org

**Summary:**

Christmas, 1992: Will finally returns with his roommate to Hawkins, IN to reveal a secret to his mother and step-dad, Hopper. But before he can, he's reunited with his former best friend, and crush, Mike Wheeler, who broke his heart four years ago and seems to want to make amends.

## 1. Part I: The Return

### Part I: The Return

Hawkins in the winter was always a desolate place for Will Byers, even as a child. Now, as an adult, there was a certain added amount of foreboding to it, as if the bare trees were skeletal warnings, saying “BEWARE: ENTER AT YOUR OWN RISK”.

Or maybe he was projecting. A traumatic childhood can do that to a place, make it feel more menacing. Even as the rental car ambled down the pockmarked road, he recognized the same street where bullies had sent him crashing to the ground during Halloween, triggering a panic attack that had sent him hurtling to that other place, the real place of foreboding and evil. The place Eleven had always called “The Upside Down”. The memory alone had him breaking out in a cold sweat.

A hand on his own made him jump nearly out of his skin.

“Whoa, hey,” Darius said, holding his hand up as if to prove it wasn’t a weapon. “Jumpy much?”

“Sorry,” Will answered meekly, embarrassed. He’d thought he was over it. All of it. He’d thought that if he put enough time and distance between himself and the place that had given him so many scars, he would start to heal. Maybe, eventually, even become whole again. It wasn’t a good sign that he was already starting to unravel at the seams. Maybe he should’ve waited longer. Maybe forever. He’d been doing so much better lately but now, just driving through Hawkins, all of the old hurts were rising right back up to the surface.

“You okay?” Darius asked, taking his eyes off the road to glance at him in concern. “You’re looking a little... sick.”

Will said nothing. He *felt* sick.

Darius placed his hand back on the one Will kept clenched tightly in his lap. Darius’ coffee-colored skin always looked so stark against his

own, putting Will in mind of the black and white cookies he'd always tried to extort from his mom before he'd understood how poor they were. Looking at their hands together had the same calming effect on Will as it always did and he found the tightness in his chest ease enough for him to breathe, truly breathe, for the first time since arriving in Hawkins.

"Baby, it's okay." Darius' soothed. "Everything's gonna be fine. I'm gonna be there with you, remember? And no matter what happens, you'll always have me, and Jonathan, and Zoey, and the rest of your New York family."

The reason he'd come back to Hawkins this Christmas had momentarily taken a backseat to the fresh pain that came from reopening nearly closed wounds. Having to think about both made his head hurt and his stomach roil. If this kept up he was going to chicken out altogether and have Darius turn them around and head straight back to New York. He could always call his mom from the road, tell her he got sick or something and wouldn't be able to make it after all. The excuses had become so easy by now. *No, I can't come this year, I'm behind on the rent and can't afford the bus fare.* Or *No, I can't come this year, my friend's going through a breakup and doesn't have anyone else.* Or *No, I can't come this year, I have to work over the break to save up for next semester* . He'd told himself he was finally done with excuses, with lying. This was going to be the year. Finally. It had to be. It *had* to.

He sniffed once, the cold making his nose run even inside the car, and he turned as sweet a smile as he could muster towards Darius' concern. "I know. Thanks again for doing this. I don't think I could go through with this without you."

Darius' smile was huge and blindingly white in his dark face. "Are you kidding? I wouldn't *let* you come without me."

Will's smile turned slightly more genuine.

The Byers' home hadn't changed much in the three years Will had been away. The gravel path leading up to the house was still

overgrown with weeds and the porch still sagged in the middle. The only difference was the semi-recent coat of mint-green paint on the siding, and the sporadic mounds of old snow on the roof and ground, patchy like some kind of albino mold.

Darius' pulled the rental car up alongside Mom's barely-holding-together Pinto. Even though it was only four in the afternoon, the sun was already setting behind them, casting the house and surrounding woods in a sad sepia, like a faded Civil War photograph. Butterflies cascaded through Will's stomach as they made their way to the front door and Darius lifted his fist to knock. But, of course, El had to make an entrance.

The door was pulled open before Darius' fist ever made contact and revealed Eleven's mass of chestnut hair, barely restrained in a ponytail, and her stoic, doll-like face, with just the curl at the very corner of her lips belying her impassivity.

"Finally," she deadpanned. "I thought we were gonna have to send out the fire brigade."

Will couldn't stop a grin from splitting his face in half as he wrapped his arms tightly around her shoulders. He still wasn't used to her being taller than him, and he thought he might never be. "I missed you, weirdo," he said into her hair, softly and only for her.

She squeezed him back, bruisingly hard. She might not have always been taller than him, but she'd always been stronger. "I missed you too, zombie boy."

When Will pulled back she was beaming, all dimples and sparkling brown eyes. He turned to Darius then, who'd been watching the exchange with a mixture of amusement and fondness.

"Dare, this is Jane, my step-sister. I call her El sometimes, though. It's just a nickname from when we were kids." He put a hand on Darius' shoulder then, though he could barely feel it through the layers of padding of his jacket. "Jane, this is my roommate, Darius."

"Duh," El replied dryly. "It's not like you told us you were bringing him or anything." She held out her hand and they shook. Will could

tell that Darius was surprised by the strength of her grip. He could also tell that Darius immediately liked her. “Nice to meet you. Joyce is making dinner and Hop’s out back chopping wood.”

Will wrinkled his nose. “Why? We don’t have a fireplace.”

“Beats me. Says it keeps him in shape. I think he just wants to feel extra manly every now and then. Also, there’re no games on.”

“That explains it.”

“Jane!” Will’s mother’s voice came from inside, sounding frazzled and taut as a cord, like usual. “Is that Will?”

“Yup!” El hollered over her shoulder. “And he brought his hot friend.”

She left the door hanging open and sauntered back inside like a bored cougar. Will and Darius followed dutifully after her, lugging their bags behind them, while Darius tried and failed to conceal a smile.

The warmth inside was stifling after the frigid winter air and Will found himself immediately peeling off his parka and scarf before even setting down his bag. The interior was cheerily decorated with Christmas lights that still made him shudder and an anemic but lovingly trimmed tree that was crammed into a corner between the TV and Hopper’s lounge. The whole house seemed to be sweating cinnamon and cloves, but under it were still the permeating scents of teak and mold that had defined Will’s childhood. The feelings of familiarity and nostalgia were so overwhelming that Will felt momentarily dizzy. He tried to blame it on the suffocating heat.

“Oh my God, *Will* .” His mother’s screech was preceded by her bony arms twining themselves around him like steel cables, her grey-streaked head tucking itself just under Will’s chin. Before he could even hug back, she’d pulled herself away, holding him at arm’s length to scrutinize him with wide eyes. There were more lines on her face than he remembered. “Look at you! Look how tall you are! You’re so *thin* ! Jane, doesn’t he look thin? You’re not eating enough in New York-” And to El, “- Didn’t I say he wasn’t eating enough in New York?”

"You did say that," El replied as she snatched a cooling chicken nugget from the kitchen counter and popped it in her mouth.

"Sweetie, no, those are for dinner!" Mom admonished with her usual urgency. Everything was always the end of the world for Joyce Byers.

"Mom," Will deftly recaptured her attention before it wandered too far. "This is my roommate, Darius. I told you about him."

She released Will in favor of Darius. "Of course you did. I've heard so much about you, Darius. It's so good to finally meet you." And then there was hugging and back patting and Darius looking mildly alarmed by the tiny tornado that was Will's mom.

"Come and help me set up for dinner and you can tell me all about your drive from *New York* ." She always said "New York" like she was saying "Paris, France" or "The Moon". "I still can't believe Jonathan won't be here until Christmas eve. That's so unlike him, he always stays for two weeks."

"Maybe you should let the guys put their stuff away before you force them into indentured servitude," El suggested from the couch, very pointedly not helping with any kind of preparation, dinner or otherwise, but doing a valiant job of using the remote instead of her powers to turn the channels on the tv (for their guest's benefit, one assumes).

"Oh, of course!" Mom smacked herself histrionically on the forehead. "Of course! Sorry, you boys go ahead, get settled, we'll talk over dinner."

"Jonathan and Zoey had to go to her parents' place," Will heard El explain as he and Darius made their way down the hall towards his old bedroom. "That's the danger of being in a committed relationship with someone who has a family."

"God, of *course* ! I can't believe I forgot-"

Her voice was abruptly cut off when Will closed his bedroom door. The silence was so relieving that his chest barely tightened when he saw his familiar walls, papered in rock band posters and his first

amateur attempts at illustration.

“You’re family’s so...” Darius began.

“Intense?” Will offered, throwing himself down face first on his only slightly dusty bedspread. It was amazing how it still smelled like him, like he’d never left.

“I was gonna say ‘awesome’.” Will could hear the smile in Darius voice.

“Just wait until you meet Hopper,” Will mumbled into the *Star Wars* themed comforter.

“You can call me Jim,” Hop’s deep voice rumbled around his cigarette. “Pass the potatoes, kiddo.”

“Hop, not at the table.” Mom plucked the cigarette from his mouth and mashed it into a handily located ashtray which Will stopped himself from pointing out happened to be on the table where smoking was allegedly not permitted.

El passed the potatoes. Will chased his peas around his plate with his fork.

“Darius, you have to tell us everything,” Mom enthused and Will’s stomach dipped sickeningly. “You know how tight-lipped our little Will can be. What are you studying, where are you from, how long have you and Will been friends, where’d you meet-”

“Come on, babe,” Hop said evenly, piling mashed potatoes onto his plate. “One question at a time.”

“Sorry, sorry!” She held her hands out apologetically. “You’re right. I just haven’t met any of Will’s *New York* friends before.”

“Well,” Darius began, amused. “I’m from Brooklyn, born and raised. I’m studying dance at Hunter but Will and I met in an intro to theater class, actually.”

Mom looked positively floored, her eyes big as saucers as she gaped at Will like she'd never seen him before. "You were in a *theater* class? I never knew you liked acting! You've always been so shy and-"

"Darius is being modest, Mom," Will deflected, as he always did, away from anything that put him in the spotlight. "He doesn't just study dance, he runs his own dance studio on Water St. He's even been in a couple of music videos." He drank quickly from his water glass, feeling Darius' narrowed gaze on him.

Mom's gaping was easily transferred from him to Darius and even El raised a mildly impressed eyebrow. "No ! Darius!" She said his name like an accusation. "That's amazing!"

"Anyone we'd know?" El asked casually.

"I was just a backup dancer," Darius tried to downplay.

"Michael Jackson," Will helpfully up-played.

"That's pretty impressive, kid," Hop supplied around a mouthful of mashed potatoes. Will secretly suspected he was *only* eating the mashed potatoes.

Mom made an undignified squawking sound of amazement.

"Some people say he should quit school and focus on his career full time," Will added while omitting that he was the "some people".

"I don't think that's a good idea," Hop said. "A college degree can open a lot of doors these days."

Will didn't have to look to know that Darius was giving him a stern "I told you so" look. He drank more water instead.

"Oh, I don't know," El said wryly. "I get along pretty well."

Hop huffed. "That's different."

"Jane's at the police academy," Mom preened proudly. "She's going to be Hawkin's Chief of Police one day, just like her dad." She ran a fond hand through Hopper's thinning hair, leaving it sticking up at



odd angles.

“You’re the Police Chief?” Darius inquired politely, just as eager as Will to shift the attention away from himself.

“Was,” Hop corrected laconically. “Retired.”

“He was the best Police Chief Hawkins ever had.” Mom hadn’t had much to be proud of during her life, so she took every opportunity to be as proud as she could as often as she could.

“Maybe,” Hop said, which was close as he ever came to agreeing with that statement.

“What’s wrong, sweetie? Aren’t you hungry?”

Damn. He’d thought he’d been so subtle about it. “I think I’m just tired from the drive over.” He made an effort to put a chicken nugget into his mouth and chew. He could barely taste it.

“You just need a good night’s sleep,” Mom agreed, happy to offer a practical solution to a practical problem. “Will always was a picky eater,” she said as an aside to Darius. “Especially when he was little. The doctor was always so worried that he wasn’t putting on any weight.”

Will managed to swallow his mouthful of chicken and was proud of himself for not choking on it from sheer mortification.

“I still can’t believe it took you *three years* to make it back for Christmas, Will.”

Will felt the familiar guilt as a lump in his throat and was just about to bring up one of his ever-ready excuses or apologies or both when his mother took mercy on him.

“But you’re here now and that’s all that matters.” She reached across the table and smoothed out his hair, the same hair he’d spent twenty minutes that morning quaffing into something that wasn’t “limp as a dead fish”.

“Do you boys have anything planned while you’re in town?”

A silence descended and Will realized that Darius wasn't going to take this one for him. He finally lifted his gaze from his plate and met his mother's inquiring eyes, so happy to have him back and so worried she'd do something to scare him off back to New York.

He swallowed back a fresh wave of guilt and summoned a smile from thin air. "I thought we could go see my old school. Maybe get some cocoa from Joe's."

"Oh, that sounds nice," she smiled earnestly, thankful to be connecting with him. Will wondered briefly when they'd stopped being close. But the answer came to him almost immediately. They'd stopped being close when he'd run away.

"You should take him to the theater too, you know how nice they always decorate for the holidays. Oh!" She slapped Hop's arm as a brilliant idea occurred to her. Hop's hand barely wavered on its journey to deliver potatoes to his mouth. "You should get together with Mike! He always comes home for Christmas. He's probably already here."

Will was about to try another chicken nugget but the way the blood drained from his head at the mention of Mike's name made it clear that if he put anything more in his mouth he would throw up.

"You remember Mike Wheeler, don't you, Hop?" His mother continued mercilessly.

Hopper grunted in agreement.

"What ever happened between you two? You used to be thick as thieves. He's such a good kid, Mike. Isn't he a good kid, Hop?"

Hopper grunted in agreement.

"You should ask him over for dinner!"

Will didn't think he could take much more of this. "Yeah," he managed weakly, his gaze firmly on the clenched fists in his lap. "I'll do that."

"I can't wait for Jonathan to get here," El said casually, rescuing Will

with the effortless grace she always did. He could've kissed her. "Zoey's the bomb. If they ever break up I want to keep her instead."

"*Jane*."

"What?" She shrugged innocently. "It's true. Back me up, Hop."

"She's not wrong." Mom looked at Hopper as though he'd betrayed her. "Zoey's a good kid. She's good for him. No offense to Nancy, but I never thought they were right for each other. It's good to see Jonathan going out with a girl with more meat on her bones."

"Hop!" Will and his mom cried in unison.

"What?" Hopper asked, genuinely perplexed. "It's true. Back me up, El."

"He's not wrong," El grinned cheekily.

"I'm sorry about my family," Will said softly, one hazel eye buried in the pillow, the other watching Darius. They were cramped in Will's childhood twin bed, but it would still be more comfortable than one of them sleeping on the floor like they'd told Will's mom they would.

"Don't be sorry," Darius told him just as softly. Being in bed required a soft voice. "I love them. Especially your step-sister."

"I did warn you that you'd like her more than me."

"Well, I don't know about that. You're pretty cute." He reached out and tweaked Will's nose. Will laughed and swatted his hand away. It was the first time he'd laughed all day. Darius had that effect on him. He reminded him of home. His real home. The two-bedroom POS apartment they'd left behind in Brooklyn. The one where the walls didn't constantly remind him of translucent barriers he could never break through. Where the shadows didn't make him jump because they might be creatures come to drag him back to that place. Where he could breathe and smile as easily as normal people could.

"Remind me why we broke up again," Will breathed.

Darius smiled fondly at him, indulgently. "Come on, baby. Not that again. We've been through this." His hand was soft and terribly warm against Will's cheek. "We're not good for each other that way. It gets so complicated so fast. You know I love you, Billy Bear, but we're better at being friends."

"I know," Will sighed into Darius' palm. "I love you too, Dare Bear."

Darius kissed him lightly on the forehead and pulled both his hand and his lips back. He quirked a mischievous smile at Will. "So, who's this Mike guy?"

And just like that, all the warmth was sucked out of the bed, and the room, and possibly the entire house. Will rolled over onto his back, gazing up the same popcorn ceiling he'd gazed up at a thousand times before, the same "N" shaped crack beside the light fixture where it'd always been.

"Just some guy I used to be friends with," Will said, his voice sounding hollow even to his own ears. He didn't lie often or well, especially not to Darius.

The silence that greeted him suggested that Darius was waiting for more, or that he'd caught on to Will's lie and was too gracious to rub Will's nose in it. Either way, Will's guilt made him elaborate. "We were best friends when we were kids but we had a... fight, when we were in high school, and never really made up after that."

After a pause Darius asked, "Did you like him?"

It could've been an innocent question, and Will could've answered it innocently. He could've laughed it off and said "of course I liked him, or else I wouldn't have been friends with him!" But he knew that wasn't what Darius meant, and he knew he couldn't answer in any way other than the truth.

He closed his eyes, saw Mike's face, the way he'd looked that day, and sighed lengthily, as though he could breathe all of the memories out of his lungs at once. Finally he said, "Yeah. I did."

## **2. Part II: Walkin In Hawkins**

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Trigger warnings: PTSD, anxiety, panic attacks, mentions of attempted suicide, hate-speech, difficult subject matter.

## **Part II: Walkin In Hawkins**

Hawkins was more idyllic through Darius' eyes. Will could almost forget the years of torment and bullying when he took Darius to Hawkins' High, looking vacant and charmingly haunted the way schools always do when there's no children in them.

Downtown Hawkins had been made a nest of tinsel and lights, faded like candle flames in the midday sunshine, sunshine that did little to warm them but much to improve their mood. The town was a remarkable time capsule, completely unchanged from when Will had left it. Walking down streets that were the same as the ones he'd walked as a child, it wouldn't surprise him in the least to see Dustin or Lucas walking out of the pharmacy or the cinema, with their cheeks baby fat round, not having aged a day. But they didn't walk out, and all the faces he saw were strangers' faces, though somehow familiar; like pages in a book he knew the story of but had forgotten the details of.

They drank cocoa at Joe's, like he'd told his mother they would. The warmth it filled him with lingered just long enough to get back out into the biting air. Darius made conversation but not overmuch. He had that same mysterious intuition about him that Will had always admired, knowing when Will was in the mood to talk and when he just needed companionship. Despite that, Will could tell that he was enjoying himself, even though both their noses were running and their fingers were numb inside their gloves. Darius was a city boy through and through and Will knew he was charmed by Hawkins' timelessness and rustic hospitality.

Not all the faces were strangers' faces. The older generation of

Hawkins' citizens had remained, for the most part. Dale was still the proprietor of Joe's. Old John still ran the quaint one-screen cinema. He recognized Carole and Donald Melvald from Melvald's General store, where his mom had worked for as long as he could remember. They all recognized him easily, despite his mother's claims that he had grown and become thinner, and waved enthusiastically from a distance or welcomed him back to town with earnest hugs and manly back-slaps. Will felt unexpectedly touched. He'd spent so long trying to erase Hawkins from his memory, he'd assumed Hawkins had done the same to him, trying to expel him from their history like a wound expels pus. To them, though, he'd never run away, just left temporarily.

The only building he gave a wide berth was the Palace Arcade, which still gave him the willies no matter how many times he told himself the place had no actual connection to the Upside Down or the Mind Flayer, it had just had the misfortune of momentarily housing Will Byers, walking dead-man and cursed child. He was a little curious to see if Keith still worked there, though.

By the afternoon, Darius was starting to complain about the cold, which meant, for the easy-going and dauntless Darius, that he was frozen nearly to the point of hypothermia. But Will had a strange urge to carry on, as if he were on some sort of cleansing spiritual pilgrimage, seeing the places that had haunted him for so long and proving to himself that they were only brick and mortar and couldn't hurt him any more than the long-dead Demogorgon could.

He dropped Darius off on the road beside the woods he and his friends had called 'Mirkwood', then drove the rental car down the disused, cracking drive that led to the long abandoned and condemned Hawkins Laboratory.

Will hated the cold. Ever since the Mind Flayer had possessed him. No matter how warm the weather, he always wore at least a shirt and a sweater over it. He wouldn't peel off his outer layers until he felt himself soaking his clothing through with sweat. It was a ridiculous superstition. They had destroyed the Mind Flayer and decimated the Upside Down years ago, when Eleven had led them all, even Max and

Billy, in the War to End All Wars, the one that burned every damned egg, every damned vine pod, to ashes - less than ashes, to dust. But that didn't stop Will from waking up screaming in the middle of the night, or taking showers that were hot enough to scald his skin red just to make sure he had burned every last remnant of the Creature from his body.

Paradoxically, he didn't much mind *feeling* cold. He'd never felt cold when the Mind Flayer was inside him because it had been a piece of the cold itself. It had had only two temperatures: comfortable or overheated. Being able to feel the bite of a chill was proof to Will that he was safe, a reminder that there was nothing - no one - lurking inside him still. Because of this, his love of layers and of the cold both, winter had become Will's favorite time of year.

His boots crunched in the brittle leaves and mucky snow as he plodded his way towards the looming building, all hollow window-eyes and crumbling brick facade, like the forgotten corpse of a roadkill deer left exposed to the elements. Its rusted chain-link fence kept the wilderness from encroaching upon it, the barbed wire at the top coming unravelled like the frayed edges of a sweater washed too many times.

As the building grew closer, a chill crept up under Will's collar that had nothing to do with the weather. Muscle memory made his jaw clench, his palms start sweating. His mom would drive him. Or Jonathan. Or Hopper, if no one else could. He would take off his clothes in a cold, sterile room that smelled like rubbing alcohol and window cleaner. A stone-faced nurse would hand him a dressing gown as thick and warm as a piece of tissue paper and barely came down to his knees. Even as he walked, twigs snapping popcorn fast underfoot, he could feel the icy metal table against his back, hear the scratch-scratch-scratch of the electroencephalograph, faster and faster, as his breathing came ragged, faster and faster. The soothing voice of Dr. Owens, trying to coax him to reveal the terrors lying in wait in his mind, waiting for a moment of weakness to spring out and attack.

Will stopped walking. He'd come to the guard post, the window long since broken, nothing but jagged glass teeth at the edges and graffitied dicks on the frame. From the looks of it, a family of

raccoons had recently used it as a nest.

Will didn't know what he was doing here anymore. Maybe he'd never known. It was one thing to visit old haunts with Darius' easy smile and innocent curiosity, like turning on the light in the closet and proving to yourself there are no monsters there. It was another thing to go, alone, to one of the places that had left the most scars upon him. He could still faintly hear the echo of his own screams, when he hadn't been in control of his own voice, his own body, when all he'd wanted was to tell Mike and Bob and Hopper and his mom that it wasn't safe, that they had to kill him, but that *thing* made him kick and scream and claw at the people he loved, wanted them dead, wanted this whole world to burn. Sometimes, at night, he could still feel that searing hate inside him, a memento the Creature left behind so he would never forget what it had done to him.

He knew then that he couldn't do this. He'd been wrong to come back here. He didn't have to come back to Hawkins to do what he wanted done. He could've told his mom over the phone. Or been even more of a coward and had El tell Hop and his mom for him. Being back here was too much. The line between then and now was too thin. Past and present were bleeding together. If he turned his head just the right way, looked at the world out of the corner of his eye, he'd be right back there, no time having passed at all, and he'd find that he'd been thirteen years old this whole while and the last seven years had been a cruel fever dream courtesy of the Mind Flayer.

He could feel his heart thundering between his collar bones, each breath he took a small, panicked thing like a trapped animal. He patted his pockets frantically but he'd left his pills in his bag, the bag that was back in his childhood bedroom. He had to get out of here. He had to get Darius, throw him in the car and get them both back to New York. He had to-

He'd been so consumed by his memories and his pain that he hadn't seen it. A black Pontiac a few dozen yards away from the guard post, a sleek, modern monolith amongst the dead winter scrub. Its rear faced away from the road, in the direction of the old train tracks he and the guys had walked down countless times. He couldn't have said why, but his heart seemed to stop beating, like it was waiting.



He was halfway there before he'd even registered he'd started moving again. But he passed the car. It wasn't what he was looking for. He was looking for the driver.

He walked - crunch-snap - towards the train tracks, his view of them blocked by the barren, ash-colored bodies of trees that seemed surprised to be caught undressed.

He wasn't there, but then, all of a sudden, he stepped around a lightning felled log and there he was. He didn't know how he knew, but he did. The same way you know where your nose is even though you can't see it, or the same way you know you're being watched on a deserted street. He knew that silhouette, even though he'd never seen it like this before. The straight lines of the long black overcoat, collar popped up against the chill, a fragrant plume of cigarette smoke billowing out to battle the crisp dirt and snow scents of the forest. He knew it was him even before he'd turned around.

Mike Wheeler turned from the train tracks at the sound of Will's approach. Will froze where he was, a deer in headlights. He looked the same and entirely different. His hair was longer, nearly to his shoulders, thick black waves like Will remembered. Same full red lips and skin whiter than his mother's good china, white enough that his freckles stood out on it like ink dots on paper. Same dark eyes, terrifying voids that the unwitting can get lost in. But he was taller. Much taller. Almost a full head taller than Will - though that wasn't saying much since Will was shorter than nearly everyone he met. His shoulders were a little broader but mostly he was wiry and lithe, a lean panther ready to pounce.

Will forgot everything. The laboratory, the Mind Flayer, the reason he'd come back to Hawkins, the last three years of his life at Hunter college. Everything faded away and left him back where he'd been, in Junior year of High School, standing in the empty hallway leading to the cafeteria with Mike's face rage reddened and Will standing motionless, hoping that if he stayed still long enough he might just disappear altogether.

But then the moment passed. And it wasn't sixteen-year-old Will standing in front of seventeen-year-old Mike in the middle of the biggest and last fight they ever had. It was a handsome, dark stranger

smoking a cigarette in the woods, and a twenty-year-old Will Byers standing fifteen feet away from him, alone, and terribly cold.

Then he spoke. "Hi, Will."

His voice was deeper than he remembered. Very deep, in fact. Hopper deep. It reaffirmed that Will did not know this person, even if he vaguely resembled his erstwhile best friend.

"Hi, Mike." His own voice sounded squeaky in comparison.

Mike plucked the cigarette from his lips with two long, pale fingers and exhaled a foggy plume that briefly obscured his familiar face. He looked at the glowing tip thoughtfully. "I heard you were back."

"I heard the same thing about you." Will wondered why neither of them was coming any closer. They were far enough away that they had to raise their voices to be heard, but the impulse to approach just wasn't there. Maybe it was a defense mechanism, their bodies instinctually recognizing a threat and making them keep their distance.

"I come here all the time, you know." He gestured around the area with his cigarette. "I don't know why. Maybe to remind myself that it all really happened. That I didn't dream it all up."

He wanted a *reminder* ? It was all Will could do to *forget* .

Mike seemed to take Will's silence as some sort of agreement. "It still doesn't feel real though, does it? I mean, the lab, the forest, even if it's all here, it just looks so... ordinary now. Just another forest, another abandoned building. What happened seems like one of those ghost stories people make up about old insane asylums."

"I don't know," Will heard himself say. "Maybe those ghost stories are true."

Mike laughed on an exhale of smoke. "Yeah. Maybe."

Will took a moment to wonder what he looked like to Mike. Short, skinny, bundled heavily in unfashionable layers, anything from the thrift-store that could keep him warm - not the sleek 'young

professional' coat Mike was sporting. His nose was red and wet, surely. He must look just awful. His hair looked good, though. He always made sure of that. No more bowl-cuts for Will Byers. It was short on the sides and longer at the front, with at least a quarter-pound of product in it to keep it looking pleasantly and carelessly ruffled.

And then he took a further moment to wonder why he cared what he looked like to Mike. Surely it didn't matter at this point, did it? Not after everything that had happened. Mike didn't look at him and see Will. He saw ghosts, the way Will did when he looked at Mike. Mike saw the sick kid Hopper and Will's mom had brought back from the Upside Down, or the kid that was strapped into a chair in the shed, or the one in a hospital gown, screaming lies. He saw the boy that had ruined their friendship and the last year of high school. He saw pain and regret.

But by then a full minute of silence had passed in which neither of them had said anything. Mike had crushed his cigarette butt under the heel of his black boot, and they'd stared at each other like two morons.

Will coughed.

Mike scrubbed his hand through the thicket of his black hair.

"Do you wanna grab a coffee at Joe's and catch up?"

At first, the words coming out of Mike's mouth hadn't made any sense. By the time Will had figured out what he was saying, Mike was talking again.

"It's been a while and I think... we have a lot to talk about."

Will didn't quite remember agreeing to have coffee with Mike. He also didn't quite remember getting in his car and following Mike's black Pontiac out onto the road, parking outside of Joe's, sitting down, or ordering a coffee which he liberally added cream and sugar to. That last part made sense though, since Will couldn't stomach

coffee unless it also tasted like candy. The rest, however, did not sound like him at all. Though he must have made the decision to do so at some point because there he sat, in a cracked vinyl booth, across from Mike, at Joe's Diner, with a cup of candy coffee in front of him.

Mike had taken off his heroic black overcoat to reveal a black sweater pulled over a black button-down. Apparently black was his brand these days. He was industriously building a fort made out of coffee creamers and studiously avoiding Will's eye. Will's hands were gripped tightly about his steaming mug. Neither of them had said anything since they'd ordered their coffees.

The last brick of coffee creamer at the top of Mike's fort was one brick too many and the entire thing collapsed. One creamer rolled off the table, onto the floor, and under the table of an old couple enjoying meat pies in silence together. Mike watched it go with the hollow-eyed expression of someone not actually seeing. Several moments passed in which he stared quietly into the middle distance. Then he began speaking.

"I don't know what I'm doing. I mean, I know what I'm doing. I'm in school, I live in Chicago, I have an apartment and a ficus tree. But I don't *know* what I'm *doing*. You know? I - when we were kids, when you were taken, everything changed. My whole world changed. It wasn't just homework and bullies and D&D and video games. It was so much *more*. I was so much more. I didn't have a purpose before that. I mean, kids shouldn't have a purpose, not if they're happy and loved and whatever. They should just be kids. But I didn't feel like a kid, like regular kids should. I wanted more. I wanted lightsabers and Middle Earth and magic and superpowers.

"Then you disappeared and we found El and... it was everything. I mean, it sucked. It really sucked. I was more scared than I'd ever been in my life. But it was real. It was all real. Magic and superpowers and alternate dimensions. And I had to save you. I did. Me, and El, and Dustin and Lucas. We had a purpose. I had a purpose. I was a hero in a story and it felt so *right*. It was everything I'd ever wanted, everything was falling into place. Then the Mind Flayer happened. Then the Beholder. Then the War to End All Wars. We meant something. We saved Hawkins. We might've saved the

whole world.

“Of course at the time I’d hated it as much as everyone else. How could I not have? People were dying, my friends were being hurt. I wanted it all to end, to have a normal life, for everyone I loved to be safe. But then it *was* over. And everything *was* normal. Instead of climbing through portals to the Upside Down we were studying for the SATs, and picking out suits for prom, and choosing colleges.

“I have to go to class every day, I have to sit through sociology lectures and stupid, bald old men telling me about Kurt Vonnegut and Nietzsche and the fucking Panamanian economy. They don’t know what’s out there. They couldn’t begin to understand what I went through - what *we* went through. The world is so goddamn small to them! They don’t *get* it. How am I supposed to go to class and listen to these assholes? How am I supposed to go home every night and study and watch fucking TV and call my Goddamn girlfriend when I know what’s out there? When I know what we *did* ?”

His dark eyes were brimming with tears one breath away from falling. He lit a cigarette with shaking hands.

“How the fuck am I supposed to get a job and have a life when the best thing I could ever do is already over?”

One treacherous tear broke free and slid down his porcelain cheek. Even the way he cried was perfect.

Will could feel his own vision misting over with tears. But they weren’t tears of sympathy. They were tears of rage. He kept his hands clamped knuckle-white around his mug to stop himself from throwing it at Mike.

Mike swiped at the errant tear, his eyes still threateningly red-rimmed. He still wouldn’t look at Will. Or couldn’t. Then he said, his voice handsomely cracked, “I’m sorry about what I did to you. We were a team. You, me, El, Lucas, Dustin, even Max. We all went through the same things. I’d... “ He scrubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands before they had a chance to betray him again. “I was going through a lot and I was an asshole and I ruined a lot of things.

Now everything's... everything's shit. And everyone's gone. And I don't know what the fuck I'm doing. Will." He deigned to look at him now. "I'm sorry."

When Will spoke, his own voice was alien to him. It was a broken, ragged, vicious thing that he didn't recognize. "You're sorry?"

Mike startled at the malicious tone in Will's voice. He looked at him as though he'd never seen him before, as though he'd accidentally sat himself across from a wild animal.

"You're fucking *sorry* ?" Will's voice went on relentlessly. He could do nothing to hide the choking in his voice or stop hot tears from breaking free. "I *needed* you, Mike. Do you want to know what I do every day, when I get home from school after listening to assholes drone on about shit that doesn't matter, after everything we've seen? I take three Xanax and go to sleep with the TV on so I don't have to hear the screaming in my head. You think that was the best thing you'll ever do? Do you have any idea what it's been like for me, having to remember what happened? What is was like having that *thing* inside of me, destroying me, *raping* me?"

Mike flinched violently at the word. Will drank in his pain at having to listen to it, just one fraction of what it had been like to actually live it.

"Yeah, *Mike* ," he bit out the name the same way he'd bit out 'thing'. "*Raped* me. More than anything, anyone, could violate anyone else. You have no idea," his voice staggered sideways, like a lurching drunk. He had to force himself to breathe in order to keep speaking. "You have no idea what it felt like, to have it burning away at everything that makes me who I am, to use my body, to fuck my mind. I can't forget it. I can't. I try so hard and I can't forget."

He was crying enough now to embarrass himself. Enough for the elderly couple enjoying meat pies to no longer be enjoying their pies. But he couldn't stop. His mouth, his eyes, were floodgates. They'd been opened and there was no stopping them until they ran dry.

"I couldn't get the nightmares to stop - Nothing I did, nothing -" He could barely breathe through the hiccupping sobs constricting his

ribcage. "I couldn't live with it - not with the screaming - I just had to stop - all of it -"

Mike's black void eyes widened as he understood. His deep voice was a soft, scared rumbling in the back of his throat, his Adam's apple bobbing on a deep swallow. "No, Will, no - you didn't -"

"Well it didn't work, did it?" Will cried. If the whole diner's attention hadn't been on them before, it was now. Who gave a shit? None of them mattered. None of them were real in the soap opera that was the life of Will Byers. Everything was just set-dressing to the great pain that was his living nightmare. "Nothing I do - ever fucking works. Not even killing myself. And where you were you? *Mike* ? Where the fuck were you when I needed you the most? You were my best friend and I *needed* you-"

"I didn't know-"

"Of course you didn't, because you fucked off the second I was less than perfect, because we kissed and you weren't man enough to just say 'No, Will, I don't like you like that' and just be a good friend and *be* there for me, when I was fucked up and scared because -"

"Will, I'm so sorry, I'm so, so sorry - I never meant-"

"You never meant what, Mike? Never meant to call me a 'fucking fag' or you never meant to leave me alone and scared until I ended up swallowing a bottle of Valium?"

Mike's mouth opened and closed but only a helpless, squeaking sound escaped him.

"Fuck you, Mike," Will bit out. "Fuck you."

Will slid himself out of the booth, grabbed his coat and ran out. He faintly heard Mike calling after him, "Wait - please - Will, *wait* -" but he was already out the door, in the rental Geo, and peeling away.

The Byers' front door slammed and Will Byers stormed in like a five foot five blizzard of fury and pain. Darius was on the living room sofa

with his mom and Eleven, Hopper in his lounge watching some sports game on the TV, and they jumped as though a literal blizzard had just blown into the house. Will tried to conceal his red face, streaming nose, and unstoppably leaky eyes as he stomped past them down the hall.

“Will, honey, what’s the matter?” He heard his mother say, but then he’d slammed his bedroom door and thrown himself on his bed in a fit of sobbing so violent he thought he was going to be sick.

He couldn’t remember hurting this bad since the Mind Flayer. Since Mike Wheeler had stood in the hall of Hawkins High and said “I don’t wanna be friends with a fucking fag.”

It hurt all over. It hurt deep inside places that shouldn’t be able to feel pain. Every callous he’d grown since he was sixteen, every layer of protection he’d added to the wall around his heart, had dissolved and every nerve in his body was on fire with it. Years of therapy, of Jonathan and Darius holding him through another nightmare, of telling himself that he could live a normal life, that he could get over this, that he could breathe without feeling *it* inside him, were all gone faster than if they’d never been there at all.

Fuck Mike Wheeler. Fuck this town. Fuck everything -

A knock came at his door. Before he had a chance to scream “go away”, a soft but solid voice said, “It’s me.”

He didn’t say “come in”. She would come in anyway. And he wanted her to. He always wanted her to.

Eleven opened and quietly shut the door behind herself. She took one look at Will, at the state he was in, and crashed onto the bed, pulling Will’s head onto her lap, stroking her fingers through his fine hair. He clutched at her thighs like she was a raft in the shit sea of his shit existence on this shit planet.

“I loved - I loved him so much,” he gasped through his sobs.

“I know, kiddo, I know,” El soothed, strong and sure, the way she was in all the things she did.



Will's fingers dug painfully into the coarse fabric of her jeans. He embraced the pain, a distraction from the pain in his chest, in his mind, in his everything. "He was - everything - and - and he - he left me - he ruined - everything -"

"It's okay, you're okay. You're okay." The way she said it brooked no room for argument. She said it the same way she would say an unequivocal truth like "the sky is blue" or "The Empire Strikes Back is the best movie ever made." It had the dual effect of calming him and making him feel deeply ashamed of himself.

He didn't know if it was some facet of her power, or just an innate aspect of her personality, but he could already feel his breath easing, his sobbing turning into something less like vomiting and more like crying.

He oddly never felt the need to clarify who he was talking about. He knew that she knew. Not just because she had a superhuman ability to close her eyes and see any event happening to anyone she wanted to, but because she knew *him* .

"I needed Mike and he left me," he said in a small voice, a scared child's voice. "And he doesn't even care. He doesn't even know. My life was ruined and it was a fucking game to him. I'll never be normal, I'll never go to sleep without being scared of the dark." Fresh tears tracked down his face, dampening El's jeans. He could barely breathe through his clogged nose. "I'm broken. I'm broken, El. I'm broken-"

"You're not broken," El commanded, her forceful fingers in his hair yanking his head up to look at her and her unwavering, sure gaze. "You're an idiot, but you're not broken."

A watery smile made its way onto Will's face and El's expression softened a fraction.

"Did I ever tell you why Mike and I broke up?"

Will shook his head as much as he could while still in her grasp.

"I fell in love with him because he was the first person my age who'd

ever been kind to me. He was brave, and patient, and loyal. I thought the world revolved around him. I thought that for a long time. But then I changed, and he didn't. I grew up, but he stayed a little boy. A little boy with little ideas about how the world works. Mike sees the world in black and white. Good, or bad. Do, or do not-

"There is no try?" Will offered, and they both managed a laugh. It seemed to suck some of the darkness from the room.

"Mike is selfish," Eleven continued, speaking slowly and carefully, finding exactly the right words. "Because he's always trying to be selfless. He doesn't see what the people he loves need, he sees damsels in distress and evil monsters to be slain. He doesn't understand that the most heroic thing you can do is be there for the people who need you, even if it's just to listen or be supportive. He's... What's the word, for when you can't see things that are close up?"

"Farsighted?"

"Yeah. He's ethically farsighted. He thinks being good means doing big things. But being good, in the normal world, means doing a lot of small good things." She smoothed Will's hair off his forehead in a heartbreakingly maternal gesture, her usually hard face all soft, sympathetic curves. "Understand?"

Will nodded minutely.

"Good," she sighed, looking lighter. "You're not broken, zombie boy. You just have feelings. Those are normal, I've heard."

Will laughed wetly. El, angel that she was, grabbed a fistful of tissues from the box on his nightstand and handed them to him. He blew his nose like a small elephant and El chuckled. He shot her a murderous look and she laughed harder, which in turn dissolved Will's glare and sent him into a fit of giggles and soon the pain was something numb and ignorable, the way it had been for years.

El's laughter cut off abruptly. Her head turned sharply to the side, like a dog hearing a distant siren. Not a second later, the muffled sound of the doorbell filtered in to them, proceeded by

indistinguishable voices and the door closing.

El rolled gracefully to her bare feet as Will struggled into a sitting position. She opened the door a crack and stood in the door jamb, a barrier between Will and the world.

“You shouldn’t be here,” she icily told whoever was on the other side of the door. But Will had a pretty good idea who it was all the way.

“Please, I just want to talk to him,” came the now familiar deep voice.

“It’s not a good idea-”

“El,” Will cut her off. She turned her head just a fraction, just enough to look at him without letting Mike out of her sight. “It’s fine.”

She turned her head the rest of the way, her soulful brown eyes saying ‘are you sure?’

Will smiled to convey that he wasn’t sure but that he was brave enough to handle it. The tilt of her eyebrows told him that she understood.

“I’ll be right outside,” she told him meaningfully, and opened the door enough to slide out.

Then Mike came in. He was wearing his coat again. Presumably he hadn’t let his mother take it at the entrance, opting instead to make a beeline for Will’s room. He looked around it with the same sad nostalgia as Will had when he’d first arrived. Though, he supposed, it wasn’t the same nostalgia. Mike’s was one born of shame, regret, and fondness for a time lost. Will’s was one of loss for his innocence and the impact of a thousand tiny hurts.

Mike saw him then. It was impossible to miss the wreck that Will was, tear-streaked and rumpled like a beaten hooker. Mike’s own face didn’t seem to be faring too well either. He looked one step away from hysterics himself.

A long, awkward moment passed where Will toyed with the edges of the tissues in his hands and Mike tried to decide the best way to

stand without putting his weight entirely on either foot.

Finally Will said, “Do you want to go somewhere?”

Mike startled. He looked around as if he’d missed some crucial piece of information on the walls. “Go... somewhere?”

“Yeah,” Will said. “To talk.”

It was understood that El was listening to everything they were saying. Leaving might make it more difficult for her but she would pinpoint them eventually. Mostly it was because the walls were thin and Will wanted to get out of earshot of his family in case more yelling was required.

“Sure,” Mike said after a long, careful pause.

“Okay.” Will said, getting to his feet. “Good.”

He rounded the bed and yanked open the window. He’d never taken off his parka or scarf, because his fit had made him forget any physical discomfort and also because he hadn’t give a shit. He lifted his legs easily over the sill and dropped softly to the barren earth outside. He ducked his head inside and looked back at Mike, who was still standing near the door, looking lost. “Coming?”

## **Notes for the Chapter:**

Thanks so much for the comments, kudos, bookmarks, and subscriptions thus far! Your support means the world to me and it's so great to know that so many people are enjoying this fic after just one chapter. I wanted to post chapter 2 today since the first was posted on a Thursday and it'd be a whole 9 days before the next scheduled update day. From here on out, expect updates regularly every Saturday.

Hey, listen. We have a lot of fun here, but did you know that leaving a comment on a work of fiction literally helps keep writers alive? It's true. By leaving just one comment a day, you can help stop a writer from dying. Do your part and, together, we can put

an end to the writer extinction!

~\*~tHe MoRe YoU kNoW~\*~

### 3. Part III: Castle Byers

## Part III: Castle Byers

1988

Snip snip snip went the scissors in Mike's deft fingers. Will watched russet colored strands falling in front of his eyes, landing on the floor in a messy pile, like straw in a barn.

*Shhhhhh* went the pomade, sounding like whip cream from a can. Will shivered only a little as Mike's fingers dragged across his scalp. Then Mike's face was in his, black eyes narrowed in scrutiny over his work as he tweaked, puffed, perfected. Will used every ounce of strength to will the blush out of his cheeks, focusing his gaze on El's old blanket fort over Mike's shoulder instead of on the face that was inches from his own.

Will was quite proud of himself, actually. He'd been doing tremendously well keeping his feelings in check lately, and he deserved a damn medal for barely reacting when finding himself in as compromising a position as being shirtless and alone with Mike in Mike's basement, with Mike's hands in his hair and lightly brushing errant strands off his bare shoulders. If he could get through this, he might just be able to handle this stupid crush long enough for it to disappear. Or so he hoped.

At last, Mike stepped back, surveying Will critically. Then his face split into a grin. "Radical," he said.

"Really?" Will's eyebrows rose skeptically.

"Really," Mike continued to grin, hands on his hips like a proud sculptor.

"Really," Will repeated flatly.

Mike's dark eyes widened. "You don't believe me?" He threw a dramatic hand over his heart. "You think I'd give you a bad haircut?"

Will just quirked his lips, enjoying egging Mike on but also slightly nervous despite himself. His mother had been cutting his hair since he could remember. This year he'd finally had enough, after even Mike had shorn his hair to something more closely resembling the heatthrobs on the cover of *Seventeen*. When Mike had promised to shape Will's hair into something reminiscent of his own, Will could hardly turn him down. Not just because he was tired of being poked fun at by Troy, but because he couldn't pass up an opportunity to let Mike get his hands in his hair. He may have been trying to quell his crush, but that didn't mean he couldn't indulge himself from time to time. Who knew when he'd get another chance?

"Come on," Mike ordered, pulling Will by the arm into a standing position and directing him towards the small basement bathroom. He pushed Will in front on the mirror, standing behind him so they could both admire Mike's handiwork.

Will's jaw dropped. He lifted a reverent hand to lightly brush his fingers along the short sides, not daring to touch the perfectly sculpted top or move aside the roguish forelock that fell down artfully into his eyes.

"See?" Mike said quietly, watching him in the mirror. Will had to avert his eyes from Mike's intense gaze. "Like Johnny Depp."

Will gently scrubbed his hand over the back of his head, relishing in its freeing shortness. He thought Mike resembled the brooding *21 Jump Street* star more than he ever could, but he was flattered all the same. "So you think it looks good?"

"Really good." Will could hear the smile in his voice.

He decided to play back, looking up at Mike from under his lashes, smirking coyly. "Really *really* good?"

But Mike's smile faded as he met Will's eye in the mirror. Time seemed to stop as they looked at each other, Will's heart stuttering to a halt.

"Really, really good," Mike said whisper-soft, his warm breath ghosting across the nape of Will's neck.

He couldn't remember when Mike's hand had landed on his hip. Maybe when he'd been steering Will into the bathroom, maybe later. But he was aware of it now, fingers placed on denim and thumb tracing a little circle on the sensitive skin of Will's waist. Will could feel the heat radiating off of Mike's body, a furnace, a forest fire.

The stopped time stretched. Their gazes remained unbroken. Something built between them as Will stared back, an electric charge, sending static sparks dancing across his naked skin. He'd tried so hard not to notice all the little details about Mike that made his blood run hot, always tearing his mind away to thoughts of baseball or church whenever he'd find his eyes lingering on the pale column of Mike's throat or the red fullness of his lips. But he was safe here, in this time capsule, in this made up land where Mike's dark eyes sparkled when he looked at him and Mike's free hand alighted on Will's other hip, penning him in.

Will let himself look. He looked at thick, black lashes. He looked at angular lines and boyish freckles. He looked at thick, tousled black hair falling carelessly into his face. He watched Mike close his terrifying, dark eyes and lower his head to breathe hotly in Will's ear.

Will heard a small sound, a sort of strained mewling, and realized one second too late that it had come from his own throat. He felt Mike's nose tuck into the hair behind his ear, heard his labored breathing, could've sworn he could feel Mike's heart beating steadily against his back.

This was a dream. It had to be. He'd had a thousand dreams before just like it. So he did what he always did in those dreams. He rotated slowly under Mike's hands, until they faced each other. The places where Mike's thumbs met Will's skin were burning. Mike's eyes were still closed, his long lashes splayed against high cheekbones. Gently, slowly, like approaching a wild animal, Will raised his hands to Mike's face, pushed up on his toes and kissed him.

Something broke then. The stopped time shattered. Everything was in motion. His heart was pumping blood through his veins, sending it roaring past his ears. Hands were moving, sliding, pushing, gripping. Mike's tongue parted Will's lips and invaded his mouth, searching, claiming, taking. There were noises, grunts, gasps, whimpers. Teeth,



tongues, lips. He was shoved back against the sink and the porcelain edge bit into his lower back but it barely registered, the sensation just a dull blip in the background of sensations. Mike's hands roamed his chest, his back, his stomach, leaving behind trails of fire. At some point Mike's shirt disappeared and the naked skin of their chests slid against each other, Mike's taut muscles trembling against him, his hard edges under Will's fingertips.

It was everything. Everything he'd wanted since he was thirteen. He tasted sweet and smelled of clean laundry and fresh cut grass. It was better than any dream or fantasy. It felt real and solid and their teeth clashed painfully together and their noses bumped and it was real, real, real.

Mike's hands slid past the waistband of Will's jeans and shorts and squeezed his ass and Will had to release Mike's mouth to gasp. "*Mike,*" he breathed hoarsely.

That did something to him. Mike made a sound in the back of his throat somewhere between a growl and groan. He lifted Will up by his ass and set him down hard on the sink, then he shoved his thigh between Will's and *thrust* and - oh -

"Sh-shit-!" Will cried, his arms clutched tightly around Mike's shoulders, face buried in the crook of his neck. He could feel the press of Mike's cock against his hip, and the friction that dragged across his own with every buck of Mike's pelvis curled hot and heavy in the pit of stomach, white hot sparks spreading through him.

"God - Mike -" Will panted, blunt nails scraping across Mike's skin, leaving red welts behind. He could hear the sink banging against the tiled wall in time with Mike's thrusts.

"*Jesus*," Mike moaned and bit down into the sensitive flesh where Will's shoulder met his neck. The spike of pain made Will's hips buck wildly up against Mike's and they cried out in tandem, denim scraping against denim, Will's cock throbbing against the confines of fabric and weeping from the harsh, amazing, mind-blowing friction.

"Fuck - Mike - I can't-" Will whimpered, one leg thrown around the back of Mike's thighs, keeping him close, closer, closest. "I'm gonna-

Oh shit - *shit* -"

He saw stars behind his tightly clenched eyes. His body trembled, convulsed, as he spent himself in his jeans, an explosion that wracked his body from his balls to his belly to his dick. He whined and gasped and choked, falling with it, falling and falling and falling. And just when he thought it'd never end it was done, leaving him raw and useless and drained.

When he regained consciousness he realized Mike was still rutting against him, his sweat slick belly sliding against Will's own, making sounds against Will's neck that he'd never heard him make before but God, he wanted to hear him make those sounds again and again, every day, for the rest of his life.

He knew Mike was close, he could tell by the way his hips were bucking shallowly, just little aborted jerking motions. It wouldn't take much to push him over the edge.

Will pressed his nose to Mike's temple, breathing in the shampoo smell of his hair and musky scent of sweat on his skin. He kissed his ear, gently, sweetly, and breathed into it, soft as a prayer, "*Mike* ."

Mike stilled against him, muscles spasming under Will's hands, and made a choking sound like a wounded animal. Will held him through it, relishing every shiver and muffled cry. He kisses his shoulder, his neck, his ear, his neck again, every place he could reach without moving him.

He'd done this to Mike. *Will Byers* had made him feel this way. It was him. Not Eleven, not any other girl. Not any other boy for that matter. Just him. Mike had let him kiss him, he'd kissed him back, they'd done... well, Will didn't know that much about sex, not more than he'd learned from the Playboys Lucas had stolen from his Dad's stash and what was there didn't exactly apply to Will's, um, lifestyle - but what they'd just done sure felt like sex. *Sex* , he thought, in awe. *I had sex with Mike Wheeler!* He was so deliriously happy he could've cried, or floated, or burst into a million bubbles. *Mike Wheeler likes me back!*

This made up for everything. All the pain he'd been through, all the

awfulness, the cold and fear and the nightmares. It was all okay because it had been leading to this, to them. They were going to be together and everything was going to be okay. Mike would fix him, because that's what Mike does. He fixes everything. He fixed Eleven and he could fix Will too. From now on, everything would be perfect. He knew it. He just *knew* it. Because everything is perfect when Mike Wheeler likes you back.

When Mike's trembling finally subsided, he extricated himself from Will's arms and turned around immediately, bending to retrieve his shirt and hastily yanking it down over his head. When one second passed, and then another, and another without Mike meeting Will's eye, Will felt something clench deep in his gut, the same terrible foreboding that came over him before one of his "episodes", before his connection to the Mind Flayer snapped his mind into the Upside Down.

Will tried to say something, anything, but his throat was closing up. Mike still wouldn't look at him. He was picking up the towel, the one that had slid from Will's shoulders, collecting the cut hair from the floor, gathering up the scissors and the pomade. Was he angry at Will? Had he done something wrong? Was it not... good? He racked his brain trying to think of reasons why Mike wouldn't talk to him, even look at him. He had to do something, he had to-

"I need to go change my clothes," Mike said abruptly. His voice sounded hollow, like an imitation of what Mike's voice should sound like. "I think you should go."

"I-" Will squeaked. He tried to clear his throat, get normal sounding words out of it. "Yeah, okay."

Mike didn't wait for him, didn't even turn around. He just stalked up the stairs, Converse sneakers squeaking on the old boards, and slammed the basement door behind him hard enough to rattle Will's bones.

Will crumpled to the bathroom floor, shivering despite the late spring heat. He was suddenly disgusted by the wet patch spreading across the front of his jeans. He was disgusted by the sweat still cooling on his skin. He was disgusted by himself. He'd done this. *He* had. Will

Byers had ruined everything, again. The cursed boy, zombie boy, the dead thing. He'd ruined the best thing that had ever happened to him. And the worst part was: he didn't even know what he'd done wrong.

## **Present**

Will pushed aside the cold-stiff blanket that kept Castle Byers secret from the outside world and ducked inside. He didn't remember it being this small. But, he supposed, he had been much smaller then. He crawled into the corner, the one with the moldy pillow and blanket and brought his knees up to his chest. It was warmer inside the little fort than it was outside, shielded as it was from the wind, but not by much. The beam of his flashlight cast uncanny shadows in the valleys of twigs and half-heartedly sanded branches.

He could still vividly recall the destruction of Castle Byers by the Demogorgon. It was strange how changing things in the real world made them change in the Upside Down, but changing things in the Upside Down didn't affect them in the real world. It was one of those mysteries they'd never solved and as children had taken for granted as being magic. But Will knew now that there was no magic in the world, or any other world for that matter. Just evil.

Mike had an even harder time getting inside. He had to fold himself like a black origami crane, all his limbs sticking out at awkward angles when he managed to finally sit down. It was still a little wonderous how tall he'd gotten. It was kind of like planting a sapling and coming back years later to find it grown into a hardy tree.

They looked like intruders in this children's sanctuary. Two fountain pens in a crayon box. They didn't belong anymore, hadn't for years. Not since the last time they were both here together, when they'd been twelve years old and reading comic books. *The Amazing Spider-Man* and *Teen Titans*. He knew because the comics were still there, waterlogged and weather-worn to near illegibility under a rock that Will had kept because it had reminded him of One-Eyed Willy's skull.

"I missed this place," Mike said, eyeing the drawings still valiantly clinging to the tree limb walls.

“What did you want to say to me?” Will said, slightly sharper than he’d meant to but Mike’s comment had rubbed him the wrong way. Castle Byers wasn’t his to miss, any more than Mike’s basement was Will’s.

“I’m sorry,” Mike said quickly, as if it had been on the tip of his tongue just waiting for the right moment to escape. Will made a dismissive noise in his throat but Mike barrelled on. “No, I’m serious. I’m sorry. Not just about today, but about everything. You’re right, I abandoned you. You had suffered, more than any of us, and you needed your friends - your *best* friend - and I took that away from you because I was scared.”

“ *You* were scared?” Will was having a hard time mustering any sympathy for Mike.

Mike was still determinedly looking at Will’s old drawings, too much of a coward to face the disgust writ large across Will’s features. “Of course I was. You don’t think it scared me shitless that I had a crush on my best friend? That I was going to ruin everything between us? I’d looked a Demogorgon right in its fucking sphincter face but I have never been more scared in my entire fucking life than when I realized I wanted you.”

Will thought he was going to lose consciousness. His vision was turning black around the edges. The last four years of his life were rewriting themselves to accommodate this new version of events. It couldn’t be possible. Or true. Mike had to be making fun of him, or playing some kind of sick joke.

“Fuck you,” Will said, his voice a hoarse whisper.

Mike did look at him then, and there wasn’t a hint of humor or mockery in his expression. Just the deep set lines of pain. Will recognized it because it was the same pain he saw in the mirror every day of his life.

“Fuck you,” Will repeated, louder but more crooked than before. He held onto the truth, *his* truth, with nails and teeth because if he let go he would drown. “You hated me. You told me to stay away from you. You’re a homophobic asshole who can’t even be *seen* with-”

“Yeah,” Mike barked out a single, mirthless laugh. “Because homophobic assholes go around taking advantage of their emotionally vulnerable friends.”

Will’s breath escaped him in a rush that left him dizzy. Without air in his lungs he croaked, “What?”

Mike didn’t hear him, or couldn’t. He was somewhere else, reliving a funhouse mirror version of their lives. “What kind of a piece of shit does that to their best friend? I knew you needed me - I fucking *knew* it. But I did it anyway. I couldn’t - I couldn’t stop myself. And it was just going to happen again - worse the next time. I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t know how to not be that way. I couldn’t let you hurt anymore than you’d already been hurt. It was just too fucking much for one kid to handle. I panicked. I wanted to get you away from me. I wanted you to be safe. I said - *fuck* -”

Mike cut off his litany to rake his hands over his face. After a pause he said, “I said things I can’t ever take back. I know that. I said things you didn’t deserve - *no one* deserves, but especially not you. I just... I hated myself so much. I hated that I was like that, I hated that I’d ruined everything. Will, you meant so much to me, I couldn’t...” His voice cracked down the middle like a lightning split tree. He swallowed down the lump in his throat and crushed the tears out of his eyes with his palms.

When he spoke again his voice was quiet and raw, not the self-centered malaise of the young man in the diner despairing his lost childhood adventures, but the real, bone-deep, aching misery he’d been concealing this entire time. “I am going to spend the rest of my life regretting what I did to you. I’ve made my peace with that. I took advantage of you when all you needed was a friend, and then I left you without even that. I can never make that right, I know that. But I just wanted you to know. I’m sorry.”

Will’s ears were ringing as if a gun had just gone off next to him. Every emotion a human could feel had just warred inside him while Mike had spoken, to the point of overloading him into numbness. Mike had set loose a forest fire that had ravaged the poisoned grounds of his insides, leaving him cleansed and unspoiled. He had the shell-shocked feeling of someone whose world has just been

violently rearranged. He should have cried. What he did instead was laugh.

Mike jumped at the sound and that made Will laugh harder. Now Mike was looking at him as though he'd lost his mind, and it was quite possible he had, but he couldn't stop laughing. It was just so *stupid* !

"We're such fucking idiots," Will gasped through his laughter. His ribs were starting to ache from it.

"What?" Mike looked as though he were seriously considering calling for help.

"Mike Wheeler," Will said, trying to rein in his relentless giggles and pointing a wavering finger in Mike's surprised direction. "You are a moron."

" *What ?*"

"You are a grade-A, top-notch, no-questions-about-it Moron."

Now Mike really looked like he was starting to get offended so Will wiped the laugh-tears from the corners of his eyes and took mercy on him. He said, "You can't take advantage of someone who's dying for you to take advantage of them." And because it was still true he added, "Moron."

Mike's face took on that freaked-out quality reserved for episodes of the *Twilight Zone* . "You... what?"

Will stretched out his leg and kicked Mike in the shin, perhaps a little harder than he'd meant to, but *come on* . "How can you not remember that I kissed you first, moron?"

"Oh my God, would you *please* stop calling me a moron! And I thought you'd kissed me because, I don't know, you were confused, because we were in a compromising situation and any teenager with hormones is going to kiss someone who's all up in their business - you were vulnerable!" He threw it out as if desperately casting a lifeline for the last shreds of his sanity. Will could relate. He'd been in that same position not five minutes ago. His memories were rewriting

themselves too.

"I was vulnerable because I was getting felt up by the guy I had a massive crush on!" Will laughed, but then relented. "Okay, yeah, I was messed up because of... everything. I'm still messed up, obviously. But that doesn't mean I can't consent. If not, my ex-boyfriends would be in a lot of trouble."

Mike frowned, perplexed. "Ex-boyfriends?"

Will gaped at him. "Yes, ex-boyfriends. I'm gay." He made sure to say the word slowly, in case Mike had trouble grasping the concept.

Mike just gaped back at him. "You're gay?"

"Oh my God, Mike!" Will kicked him again. Mike tried to get away from him, to protect his extremities from further assault, but there was nowhere to go in the cramped fort. "Why the hell do you think I'm back Hawkins? I haven't been back since I moved to New York. I came back to come out to my parents!"

Mike stopped in the middle of massaging his sore shin. He eyed him with suspicion, as if suspecting some kind of trick. "You're serious," he observed after a moment.

"Of course I'm serious!"

"So... you... really had a crush on me?"

"Yes!"

"And I didn't... take advantage of you?"

"Not in any way I didn't want."

"So... this whole time... we've been into each other but you thought I hated you and I thought you hated me?"

Will thought it over for several seconds and at last said, "Yes."

"We are fucking idiots."



"I know!" Will cried triumphantly. "Though really I think you're the bigger idiot here. I mean, I did kiss you first."

"Oh, you kissed me first but you thought I was homophobic after I humped you like a golden retriever?"

"Well, the - you - uh - with the - hormones!" He cried desperately. "Any teenager would when someone's all up in their business!"

"I can't believe this," Mike groaned, slightly muffled because he'd buried his face in his hands, the world proving too much for him. "I ruined the last year of high school for us because I'm a moron."

"See? Moron. I told you. Grade-A moron."

"Will." The way he said it, plaintive and unguarded, made Will look at him. "Shut up."

There was a single charged moment wherein they stared at each other and Will was instantly reminded of that afternoon four years ago when they'd looked at each other in the mirror of Mike's basement bathroom.

And then Mike lunged across the foot of space separating them, one hand clutching at the front of Will's parka and the other gripping the back of his head, and he was kissing him. It was ungente and inelegant, with Mike's elbow stabbing Will in the thigh, their foreheads knocking painfully together, and their teeth clacking against each other through their lips. But it was Mike. And it was Will. And it was something he'd thought - he'd *known* - was never going to happen again.

He'd spent the first year hating himself, for pushing Mike away. He spent the second year hating Mike, for being a homophobic piece of shit. He'd spent the next two years forgetting a person named Mike Wheeler even existed. But now, over the course of ten minutes and one kiss, the last four years of his life evaporated like a bad dream in the morning light. He was as light and happy as he'd been when he was sixteen and he'd chanted in his head *Mike Wheeler likes me back!* Because he had, and he did, and they were two idiots but they were two idiots who were kissing and wanted each other and everything in

the world outside of Castle Byers didn't matter, didn't even exist. There was Mike's long hair getting trapped between their mouths, there was Mike's knee crushing his foot, there were tongues and hands and gasps and way too much clothing, and that's all there was and ever would be.

After what was days or seconds, they broke apart for air, but Mike didn't go far, still holding onto Will as if he'd lose him. He rested his forehead against Will's and gulped down air, his breath hot against Will's skin, eyes closed in a decadent splay of black lashes.

Will wiggled to get himself into a more comfortable position without having to dislodge Mike, because he didn't want to lose him either.

"I'm sorry," Mike said, more air than words.

"Now what are you sorry about?" Will managed to free his hand from where it had gotten trapped under his back and used it to brush Mike's hair out of his face and behind his ear. It really was much longer than he was used to with guys, but it suited Mike, made him look feral and thrillingly dangerous.

"Everything," Mike replied, the corner of his pouty mouth tugging into a vestigial smile. "But mostly because we could've been doing this the whole time if it weren't for me fucking up." His fingers raked across Will's scalp deliciously, momentarily distracting him from the topic at hand.

"Oh, I don't know," Will offered magnanimously. "I fucked up pretty bad too. I mean, I could've just said, 'I have a huge fucking crush on you, Mike Wheeler, and I want you to take advantage of me in every way you can conceive', instead of keeping my mouth shut and letting you think I hated you or something."

Mike chuckled and Will felt the puff of air across his lips. "I think that would've helped, yeah. But maybe we can just agree to stop being idiots and be honest with each other from here on out."

"Starting now?" Will asked, wriggling his left leg out from under Mike to bracket the taller boy between his thighs.

“Starting now,” Mike agreed.

Will leaned up and grazed Mike’s full bottom lip with his teeth, making the latter suck in a hissing breath. “Mike Wheeler,” Will breathed against his mouth, “I want you to take advantage of me in every way you can conceive.”

Mike growled the way he had four years ago, but his voice was so deep now that the sound reverberated in Will’s chest like the thrum of a bass. He recaptured Will’s mouth with his own and Will readily opened for him, accepting the slick invasion of his tongue.

Will wished they were anywhere else - like a bed or a couch or even the tool shed - because their ungainly adult bodies were uncomfortably cramped within the flimsy branch walls of Castle Byers. Mike was trying to lie down at the same time as Will was trying to scooch forward, neither one wanting to break their oral point of contact, and they ended up playing an odd game of tug-of-war with each other’s faces.

Mike tried shrugging out of his coat and ended up ramming his shoulder into Will’s jaw, making him bite down unintentionally on Mike’s lip hard enough to make him yelp and jerk back, thus banging his head against the twig roof and causing the entire structure groan threateningly. Mike’s hand stuttered, unsure whether to reach for his head, his lip, or the walls of the fort. He ultimately settled on lip and pulled back two fingers dabbed with blood.

Will couldn’t help himself and giggled at Mike’s predicament. Mike wanted to scowl at him but grinned instead. “Okay,” he said. “Maybe this isn’t the best time.”

“Or place,” Will added helpfully.

“Yeah.”

It was all a bit anticlimactic, especially considering the erection straining Will’s jeans and the noticeable tenting of Mike’s pants. But it was enough, for now, to know that they could continue later. They had all the time in the world now.

A memory sprang unbidden to Will's mind and he smiled up at Mike, running a hand through his hair in a half-hearted attempt at smoothing it down. "Would you," Will began. "Like to stay for dinner?"

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Thank you all so much for your comments and subscriptions and kudos and bookmarks! You're all wonderful people and you should know that :)

I hope you enjoyed this latest installment. This one was one of my favorites. I really like the flashback scenes. Hey, you know what else I like? Comments and kudos. It's true. They fuel my soul and make me happy beyond measure. If you like what you read here today, then go ahead, don't be shy, leave a comment. It doesn't even have to be a review or critique, you can just say hey and I'll say hey back.

Next week: Awkward family dinners! Sibling arguments! Jealousy! Maybe sexy times, who knows!

## 4. Part IV: Kids

### Part IV: Kids

Everyone was surprised when Will brought Mike in through the front door and proclaimed that he'd be joining them for dinner, though none more so than El, who kept trying to catch Will's eye to no avail. Mom was thrilled by the turn of events and immediately enlisted Mike to help her with dinner preparation, wherein she could grill him on all the information mothers find most pertinent, such as love life and plans for the future. El decided to take advantage of Mom's preoccupation.

"I need Will to help me with something in the toolshed," El announced without preamble, clamping her talon-like fingers around Will's upper arm.

"The toolshed?" Mom asked, making a face, as she handed Mike a bunch of freshly scrubbed carrots to be diced. "Why do you need his help in the *toolshed*?"

"Reasons," El called over her shoulder, already halfway to the back door with Will in tow.

Once securely inside the frigid little shed, El rounded on Will with angry eyebrows. "Um, what the hell?"

"What?" Will asked defensively, pressing his back up against a shelf full of half empty paint cans and rusted tools.

"Don't 'what' me, Will. You know what. What the hell happened out in the woods?"

"You weren't listening?" Will sneered then instantly regretted it. That had been unfair of him. El had been nothing but supportive, she didn't deserve his snark just because he was feeling insecure.

El's frown was the only hint that the comment had wounded her. "I kept an eye on you up until you went inside Castle Byers. I thought you might want some privacy." She fixed him with a withering look

that let Will know if he made one more snide remark he was going to be in deep shit.

Will decided to concede. “No, you’re right. I did.”

“And?”

“And what?”

“Jesus, Will!”

“Okay, okay, fine!” He hugged his arms across his chest and pointedly did not look at El’s face. Under his breath he said, “We kind of made out a little...”

“You WHAT?!”

“It turns out we were both being total idiots and he’d really liked me back then but he’d thought *I* didn’t like *him* and he wanted to push me away so I’d be safe from him or some stupid shit like that.” His words tumbled over themselves as he tried to get them out as quickly as possible. The last thing he wanted was for El to think his morals were so loose that he’d jump at any chance to kiss his crush regardless of what that person had done to him. He had standards, after all. “And once we both figured out we were into each other, we realized we’d never *stopped* being into each other, and then it just sort of happened.”

“Jesus,” El said again, sitting down heavily on the edge of the work table. She absently pulled her flannel shirt tight over chest to keep out the chill. “I didn’t even know he was into dudes. I mean, I should’ve suspected. No one who has hair that great is totally straight.”

“That’s an offensive stereotype,” Will said automatically, and successfully resisted the impulse to fluff his hair. “But you’re right, I wouldn’t have guessed either. Not only was he in love with you for pretty much ever but he had, like, five girlfriends in high school.”

“And he definitely enjoyed himself...” El mused. She misinterpreted the horror on Will’s face and corrected herself by saying, “With me, I mean. I don’t know about the other girls. Though, if you trust

anything Cynthia Liddick says, Mike enjoyed himself a little *too* much if you catch my drift-

“Oh my God, lay *off* !” Will whined, dragging a malicious chuckle out of El.

“So he must be bisexual, right?” El concluded.

“I don’t know. Maybe? I should ask him.”

“I can’t believe you didn’t ask him.”

“I was kind of distracted, you know.”

“Gag. What about Darius?”

Will frowned, perplexed by the incongruity. “What about him?”

Now El frowned. “Well, are you gonna break up with him?”

“Wha- No, no, no, we’re not together. I mean, we were. And we still fool around sometimes when we’re drunk or bored or - No, we’re not dating.”

“Oh. You’re fuck buddies,” El said nonchalantly.

Will snorted. “What would you know about ‘fuck buddies’?”

“Oh, I’ve got loads of them. I’m fuck buddies with half the town.”

Will blanched.

El’s stone face cracked and she punched him (too hard) in the arm. “As *if* ! I’m fucking with you, zombie boy.”

Will rubbed his arm and tried hard to scowl but found a grin slipping out despite his best efforts. “You’re the worst sister, weirdo.”

“Yeah, well, tell it to our parents who just *had* to go and get married for some reason like ‘love’ or whatever.” She hopped lightly off the workbench and draped her arm around Will’s narrow shoulders. “C’mon, kid. Let’s go back inside and fix you up with my ex-boyfriend while I do a super fly job of pretending that isn’t weird as fuck.”

“Super fly,” Will deadpanned. “And what do we say we were doing in here?”

“Oh look,” El also deadpanned, her eyes flicking behind Will to the shelf she’d been leaning against. He turned around just in time for a box to come zooming past his face, narrowly missing his nose. It alighted in El’s outstretched hand and she gave it a little shake, looking smug. It was a dusty, faded box of *Guess Who*? “Thanks for your help, Will. I couldn’t have found it without you.”

They grinned at each other.

“It’s so nice having you back, Mike,” Mom was saying, the only other sound the clink-scrape of silverware on plates. Mike sat loose and relaxed on Will’s left, Darius poker straight and narrow-eyed on his right. He looked as if he were assessing Mike for signs of some deadly plague. “You used to come over all the time. Remember, Hop?”

Hopper grunted in agreement.

“Until you were in high school. What ever happened between you boys? I could never get the story out of Will, you know how he is. But I always wondered what could’ve come between you two.”

“We had a fight,” Mike said simply, keeping an easy smile on his face. He knew how to work the moms. “Just, some stupid kids’ things. I can’t even remember what it was about anymore. Can you, Will?”

Will startled at being suddenly dragged into a lie he wasn’t prepared for, but then he saw that Mike was looking at him, his easy smile tugged into a private smirk at the corner, and winked. Will had to stifle the girlish giggle that threatened to burst out of him, biting his lip instead. He felt like they were thirteen again, skirting inside jokes around the adults who wouldn’t understand.

“Yeah,” he agreed, the amusement in his voice evident only to them (and possibly Eleven, who knew the entire story). “Just... something stupid.”



He almost lost it when he saw Mike suck in his lip in an attempt to stop himself from laughing; instead, he shovelled a forkful of peas and carrots into his mouth.

He caught Darius' glare out of the corner of his eye and realized too late that Will hadn't been the only one to see Mike's wink.

"Well, it's good to see you've put all that behind you," Mom was saying. "You really are so grown up, Mike. Isn't he, Hop?"

Will turned to face Darius and subtly shrugged one shoulder. That was code for "What's wrong?"

"And he's studying psychology... psychiatry... What did you say you were studying, Mike?"

Darius tore his eyes from Mike long enough to pin a hard, purse-lipped look on Will and shake his head minutely. That was code for "I'm not happy, but I'll tell you about it later."

"Sociology, actually," Mike was saying. "Minor in psychology. I'm thinking about becoming a social worker when I graduate, helping kids out."

Will bit his lip and nodded once before turning his attention back to the table at large. Apparently the conversation about Mike was still going on.

"Isn't that wonderful, Hop!" Mom gasped, holding a hand to her chest as if Mike had given her something precious.

Hopper grunted. It was no longer clear if it was in agreement or not.

"You Wheeler kids really are something special," Mom continued. "We hear all about Nancy from Jonathan - you know how they still keep in touch - we hear she's a big time journalist now."

"Yeah, she's slaying 'em dead out in D.C.," Mike said. "Everyone's saying she's the next Woodward - or Bernstein."

"More like both Woodward *and* Bernstein," El said and the two shared a private laugh that made the back of Will's neck prickle a

little. He shouldn't be jealous. El and Mike hadn't been together since Freshman year. They were more like brother and sister now than anything else. Rationalizing it didn't make it go away, though.

"Have you heard from Dustin or Lucas?" El proceeded to ask, gnawing ungracefully on a chicken leg.

"Yeah," said Mike, eyebrows furrowing in concentration. "Isn't Dustin at CalTech or something?"

"Stanford," El corrected. "Doing some super science-y science thing.

"Right!" Mike snapped his fingers. "Stanford, duh. Molecular biology. That's it. And Lucas and Max are stationed at Fort Carson, right?"

"God, I haven't seen them since the wedding," El mused nostalgically.

Will stabbed bitterly into his chicken breast. He hadn't been invited to the wedding. He had, in fact, been cut off from the rest of their group of friends ever since Mike had called him a "fag" and told him to stay away from him. He had thought that in their friendship divorce he could at least have gotten custody of half their friends. But it turned out that Mike was the glue that brought them all together, and without him no one was much inclined to hang out with each other. So Will had been left with no one, except El, with whom he was already sharing a house and mother at that point. He had briefly hung out with Billy Hargrove, whom they'd made peace with in order to wage the War to End All Wars, and who it turned out was also very, very gay and very, very much in the closet. But then, of course, Billy had gone to prison. Alas.

"So, you seeing anyone, Mike?" Darius' sharp voice cut across the table.

"Um, not at the moment, but..." Mike titled his face in Will's direction and looked at him from under his lashes. "There's, uh, someone I'm interested in..."

Under the table, Will felt Mike's foot nudge his. Will bit his lip again to hide his smile and nudged Mike back. Will's half-eaten chicken breast suddenly slid from his plate and into his lap, making him

jump.

“Careful there, sweetie!” Mom warned.

Picking the chicken off his thigh with two fingers, he narrowed his eyes in El’s direction to find her narrow-eyeing him right back.

“Sorry,” he told his mother, without breaking eye contact with El. “I guess it just slipped.”

El shook her head, once. Will rolled his eyes, but made sure to keep his foot a respectful distance from Mike’s (leaving enough room for Jesus, as they say). Honestly though, they hadn’t been *that* obvious.

“And you’re Will’s roommate, right?” Mike asked, his smile still in place but his eyes blade sharp.

Darius smiled back tightly. “Will’s and Jonathan’s, yeah. We live in a two bedroom in Bay Ridge. That’s in Brooklyn,” he added condescendingly.

“Uh-huh,” Mike said, his smile growing colder.

“Darius is a dancer,” Mom jumped in helpfully, sensing hostility. “He was in a Michael Jackson music video, right, Will?”

“Yeah,” Will agreed distractedly, frowning. He regarded his two friends and romantic interests, both past and present. They were inverse images of each other. Darius’ dark skin stark against his white thermal Henley, Mike’s milky skin stark against his black button-down, both of them staring daggers at each other. He couldn’t quite comprehend what they would have against each other. Will hadn’t told Darius about the fight Will and Mike had had during Junior year, so Darius shouldn’t be predisposed to dislike Mike... Unless...

Will turned back to El and caught her eye as she tore a hunk of chicken off the bone with her teeth. He tilted his head towards Darius and raised his eyebrows. This was code for “Did you say something to him?”

“Michael Jackson,” Mike said, his voice full of mock awe. “Phat. You must be all that and a bag of chips back in New York.”

El widened her eyes and shrugged in the universal gesture of “fuck do I know”.

“Not as ‘all that’ as you are here in Hawkins, I hear,” Darius bit out through a smile that had turned into a grimace. “You’re all anybody can talk about around here. The great Mike Wheeler and his great adventures. Sounds like you got around.”

Will whipped back around to El with more forceful eyebrows.

El shot her eyes skyward and shrugged in the universal gesture of “okay, so sue me”.

“That’s funny,” Mike said, sounding as if it was anything but. “Because Will hasn’t mentioned you at all.”

A key turning in the lock of the front door cut through the sudden, icy silence, followed presently by Jonathan’s forced cheery voice. “Hi, Mom, Hop! Sorry we’re late, our flight got delayed because of a snow storm-”

Saved by the Jonathan-bell. Will breathed out a great sigh of relief as Jonathan and Zoey came into view, their arms laden with bags. They only had a second to take in the sight of everyone having dinner before Mom was up and hugging Jonathan tightly and Hop was up and awkwardly half-hugging Zoey. Darius gave Mike one last glare before rising and taking part in the greetings, fist-bumping Jonathan and embracing Zoey.

Everything blurred pleasantly after that. Mom managed to squeeze Jonathan and Zoey into the dining room table and got them plates and soon all attention was focused on the new arrivals, asking Jonathan about his latest exhibit and Zoey about her work at the gallery. Luckily, Darius seemed distracted enough to have relented on Mike, for the time being at least. They were definitely going to be having a Conversation about this later.

After dinner, they retired to the living room with drinks - beer for the guys (and El) and wine for the ladies (and Will). Will was pleasantly surprised when Hopper didn’t balk at his drinking. He’d half-prepared a defense about underage drinking but Hopper went so far as to cheer

with him when Mom proposed a toast to family. He did get a good laugh, though, when Mike tried to light a cigarette and Hopper plucked it out of his mouth and flung it out the window, proceeding to lecture him for the next twenty minutes on the dangers of smoking and the insurmountable feat of quitting.

Will tried to savor the warm, fuzzy feeling he got when he watched everyone enjoying themselves. Before this visit was over he was going to come out to his Mom and Hopper. Jonathan had told him a million times not to worry, that no one woman could love their son more than Joyce Byers did, and that Hopper had lived in the city for years before moving back to Hawkins after his daughter died - he'd seen some shit and wouldn't bat an eye at Will being gay. And it's not like he was actually Hopper's son, after all.

But Will couldn't help the way his gut twisted at the thought. More than anything he feared the quiet disappointment in his mother's face, or the way Hopper's eyes could go cold. The world was a more accepting place now than it once was, and he was lucky, a lot luckier than other kids who'd come before. Hell, he was luckier than poor Billy Hargrove. Famous people were openly gay now. It wasn't that long ago that Elton John had come out of the closet, Stephen Fry too. There was even a gay Congressman now. He knew he was stupid for worrying so much, especially considering the things he'd lived through as a kid. If he could survive the Upside Down, shouldn't he be able to survive coming out to his mom and step-dad?

Everyone else already knew, of course. The first person he'd ever told was Jonathan. He'd always told Jonathan everything. Jonathan had been a model supportive big brother, telling him that he would love him no matter what and would kick the ass of anyone who tried to mess with him. After that, it was El, because someone had to explain why Mike and he were really fighting - and she could hear him crying through the thin walls of the Byers' house. She'd taken it with her usual aplomb. Like Hop, she'd seen some shit during her stints in the big city. Mostly she'd just been amused by Will's crush on Mike, then angry because Mike was a (seemingly) homophobic douchebag. He'd managed to convince her not to make him pee himself in front of homeroom, but just barely. It was harder to convince Jonathan not to kick his teeth in. It had helped that Jonathan was already in New

York, studying Fine Arts at Hunter College. Bus fare is expensive, even with scholarships helping to pave the way.

Jonathan had told Nancy about Will, because back then Jonathan had told Nancy everything and he knew she would understand. When the Mike thing happened, he neglected to mention it to her, though whether this had to do with Jonathan not wanting word getting back to Mike that Will was talking to people about the truth regarding their fight, or whether it was due to the fact he and Nancy had recently broken up, Will didn't know but was grateful all the same.

Once Will went to college (Hunter because he couldn't get into NYU, alas), he just started out by being, well, out. He didn't exactly go around introducing himself as Will the Homosexual™, but he joined the LGBT club, made friends with openly gay students, started going on dates almost immediately (he was asked out the first day of classes, and wasn't that a trip), and so everyone who knew him from college age and onward was clearly aware of his sexual orientation (Zoey, a former classmate of Will's, being one of them).

That's probably why Will had been so bewildered by Mike's shock at his being gay. To Will it felt obvious. He felt himself deliberately trying to seem less gay when he was in questionable company. When he'd hear some asshole talking loudly about "queers ruining Christian values", he'd panic, as if they might smell the gay on him. He'd thought that Mike, of all people, who'd known him almost as well as Jonathan, would have realized it. Especially considering how Will had, well, kissed him. But apparently Mike had done some kind of Jedi-mind-trick on himself and warped that whole encounter into some kind of "molest-y" situation. Mike's mind was a mystery to Will.

Regardless, Mike knew now. That left his parents as the only people in the house who were out of the loop. Will wondered if they'd be angry that everyone else knew before they did. His mother, certainly, might feel hurt. They'd been terribly close, for years longer than most boys were close with their mothers (not that that had anything to do with him being gay, or the fact that he'd grown up without a positive male role-model, because those are offensive stereotypes and Will refused to believe his parents had any effect on what made his dick hard or not). They grew apart right around the time Will started figuring out that girls did nothing for him but his heart beat like a

jackhammer every time Mike's hand would brush against his. He still felt guilty about putting that barrier between himself and his mother, but teenage Will had been afraid she'd be able to tell and he hadn't wanted her to know, for the same illogical reasons as he was terrified of telling her now.

So he tried to push his coming out as far from his mind as possible and just enjoy El and Zoey laughing together, Darius delighting his mom with a story about Will at school, Hopper trying to teach Jonathan how to open a beer bottle with a lighter. The Byers' home had been devoid of life and laughter for so long after his father left. It was wonderful to see it this way now, to see his mom, finally, happy. Truly happy. He hated himself for being the one who might ruin it.

"- I think it was in Will's room." Mike's voice cut through the chatter and perked Will's ears.

Mike was already making his way towards Will, who was perched on the outskirts of the action in a chair brought from the kitchen. He stopped in front of him, bit back a smile, and held out his long-fingered hand.

"Come on," he said when Will just stared at it in confusion. "Show me that thing you were going to show me in your room."

"What thing - ohhhh..." Will's voice drifted off as Mike tugged him to his feet and dragged him down the hall.

The door had only just shut before Mike had him pinned against it, devouring his mouth and pushing his hands under Will's sweater. His thumb brushed Will's nipple and he gasped, pulling away a fraction. Mike just used the leeway to latch his mouth onto the sensitive skin at Will's throat.

"My whole family is literally right outside," Will panted, one fist clenched in the soft mass of Mike's hair and the other clenched in his shirt.

"Then we'll be quick," Mike said against Will's damp skin, sending shivers tingling down his spine.

"They'll hear us," Will hissed when Mike sunk his teeth into the soft spot just under his ear.

Mike breathed his answer into Will's ear, "Then we'll be quiet." Will tried unsuccessfully to stifle his whimper. Mike continued, punctuating his words with feather-light kisses to Will's ear, "You don't know how hard it was keeping my hands off you." He sucked Will's earlobe into his mouth and Will bit hard into his lip to keep from moaning out loud. "I've wanted to do this for four years, I can't wait any more."

Then Mike's hand was snaking between their bodies and was squeezing the already hard bulge in Will's jeans and his legs almost went out from under him.

"F-fuuuck," Will groaned, arms going around Mike's neck to keep himself upright. "Mike - don't - they'll hear -"

"You want me to stop?" Mike's voice was dark and his eyes hungry as he unzipped Will's jeans and slid his hand past the waistband of his briefs, cool fingers encircling his length.

"Holy shit," Will whined, knees trembling dangerously, fingers digging into Mike's shoulders.

Mike's mouth rested beside his, just close enough for Will to feel his hot breath on his lips, the flutter of Mike's eyelashes against his cheek. He gave Will's cock two, three firm strokes, enough to make precum bead at the head and stain the inside of his shorts. His voice was a dangerous rumbling that Will felt more than he heard. "Do you want me to stop?"

Will whined incoherently, his pelvis rocking into Mike's fist of its own accord. Then Mike's hand was gone, holding Will's hips still and his mouth teasingly away from Will's own.

"Holy *shit*," Will snapped. "Don't stop *now*, asshole." He pulled Mike down by the neck and kissed the laugh off his mouth.

They stumbled over to the bed, Mike falling first and Will falling on top of him. He straddled Mike's lap and fumbled open Mike's too-



tight black jeans with trembling fingers. When he released Mike's cock, rock hard and red flushed and amazing in Will's hand, Mike rolled them over so they laid on their sides, Will's legs tangled with his.

They were already breathing hard and sweat was accumulating uncomfortably under Will's clothing. Mike pushed Will's jeans and shorts down past his hips and Will wriggled on the bed, unwilling to get up, so he could get them over his ass and halfway down his thighs.

He couldn't believe this was happening. He'd lost count of how many times he'd fantasized about this, exactly this. It had always seemed too much to hope for, except for that one fleeting, amazing afternoon in 1988. He'd tried so hard, again and again, to make himself stop thinking about Mike this way. But now it was really happening. It was more than just kisses and confessions. It was Mike spitting thickly into his hand and wrapping it around Will's dick. It was Mike moaning as quietly as he could manage in Will's ear as Will pushed back his foreskin and rubbed his thumb against the hot, bruised head. It was the way Mike's hips rut into Will's hand, the way he pumped Will's cock hard and fast enough to make Will stifle his cry in Mike's shoulder, tears catching in his eyelashes. It was the sound of music filtering in from the living room and the clinking of glasses. It was Mike gasping into Will's hair, "Fuck - Will - God - yeah - fuck - *yeah* -"

Will barely had the forethought to hike his sweater up to his nipples before he came, hot jet after hot jet tearing out of him and coating his flat, spasming stomach. He could distantly hear himself whimpering like a wounded thing but it was barely audible over the thundering of his heart, his ragged breaths, and the mind-bending, all consuming, head-to-toe tingling fire that was his orgasm.

"Fuck," he heard Mike groan right before he kissed him sloppily, wetly. "You're so fucking sexy. Jesus, Will."

Will found Mike's dick again, even though his fingers were a little numb. Mike grunted as if kicked. He tugged fast, trying to get him off as quickly as he could. Mike's response was priceless, his eyes rolling back in his head and back bowing, making a Herculean effort to keep

his moans to the barest minimum.

Will kissed his throat, his jaw, his ear. "Come for me," he breathed. "Come on me," he added in a thrilling moment of baseness.

Mike's head tipped back far enough for his Adam's apple to spear the air, an aborted cry getting caught in his throat, and his climax hit Will's chest and stomach and coated his fist, mingling with Will's own.

The second the last squirt had emptied, Mike collapsed bonelessly to the mattress, his long, dark hair a messy halo against the *Boba Fett* comforter, his chest rising and falling with the labor of having run a marathon. Will indulged himself and watched him for a moment before peeling himself away from Mike's side and grabbing a fistfull of tissues to clean himself up (it required several wads). He mused wryly that these same tissues were used just a few hours ago to wipe away tears that Mike had caused. They were misunderstanding tears, but still. Quite a day these tissues have had.

Mike grabbed him by the waist and pulled him flush against his body. He cupped Will's jaw in his palm and Will had to catch his breath. He was looking at him with such unabashed sweetness that Will could almost call it love. He had the dopiest grin on his face, the exact same unschooled, unselfconscious grin that Will had fallen in love with at fourteen.

"Christ almighty, you're amazing," Mike sighed contentedly. "Is this what I've been missing out on my whole life?"

"Nah," Will ducked his head, blushing. He was back to his easily embarrassed self now that the heat of the moment was fading to a comfortable warmth. "I've had some practice recently."

"Mhm," Mike said, his grin fading. "Like with Darius."

Will exhaled testily through his nose. This again. "We're not together anymore. He's just a friend now."

"And roommate."

"Yes. Mine and Jonathan's roommate. He's here for moral support."

“Because you’re coming out over Christmas.”

“Exactly.”

“So you’re not sleeping with him.”

“Nope.” *Unless you count literally sleeping in the same bed* , he neglected to say.

But Mike seemed satisfied by this. He smiled a soft, lazy smile and kissed Will sweetly. When he pulled back he said, “Good.”

As much as he was loathe to end this, he knew their prolonged absence was going to be noticed sooner rather than later. “Do you think they miss us outside?”

“Well, I am awfully charming.”

“More like just awful,” Will grinned and Mike smacked his ass playfully for his snark.

“Okay,” Mike relented, despite his obvious reluctance. He gave Will a last chaste kiss on the lips. “Let’s dip.”

## 5. Part V: Spiked Bat

### Part V: Spiked Bat

“I’ll call you,” Mike said softly in the open door, standing close enough for his breath to move Will’s fine hair, bitter cold winter air sneaking in around him and into the fuzzy warmth of the Byers’ house. His face was all kinds of easy tenderness that melted Will’s heart and kicked butterflies into his gut.

“Okay,” Will said, looking up at him coyly through his lashes, fingers playing idly with the lapel of Mike’s black coat.

“I mean it,” Mike insisted, that earnest, dopey grin of his crumbling Will’s resolve not to let him stay the night. Mike bumped his chest playfully into Will’s. His voice was laced with dark hunger when he whispered, “I can’t wait to see you again.”

Will felt the blush creeping across his face and the back of his neck, heart stuttering in his breast. It was ridiculous how shy and smitten he could feel considering it wasn’t more than an hour ago they’d had their hands down each other’s pants. He felt like some idiot schoolboy planning a tryst with his secret paramour. Though he supposed he was regressing somewhat, due to the fact that Mike had been his first love. He was living out the fantasies he’d had as an inexperienced, virgin teenager, and God help him if he didn’t feel like one now.

Mike looked over Will’s head, back at the living room still full of Will’s family, likely judging if any of them were looking their way so he might steal a kiss. Apparently some were, because instead of kissing him he trailed barely-there fingers along Will’s jaw and started walking slowly backwards, every step reluctant. “I’ll call you,” he repeated.

Will closed the door before he lost his nerve and pulled the lanky boy back inside. Shutting the door against the frost made it readily apparent how hot his cheeks felt. He took a moment to school away his giddy grin before turning back to face the room.

When he did turn, it was to find at least five pairs of eyes hastily darting away from him and pretending they were otherwise occupied. He felt his blush turn into a full blown, crimson red flush of embarrassment and hoped fervently that they hadn't been too obvious. Maybe they'd just looked like old friends exchanging confidences? Shit. His feelings for Mike were making him reckless. There were just so *many* feelings, and all at once, it was impossible for him to sort through them and handle them in a mature, logical fashion. All he wanted to do was squeal *He likes me! He likes me!* Then go jump up and down on his bed, draw hearts in the back of his notebooks, and sigh dreamily out the window while knotting daisy chains into flower crowns. Acting like nothing at all was happening to him while his insides were bursting like fireworks was a feat he suspected was Sisyphean if not outright impossible.

He blew a steadying breath out of his cheeks and started to cross the living room to the hall, hoping to bypass curious questions or, worse, accusations. But a firm hand caught his elbow before he'd even made it past the kitchen. He looked up to find Jonathan's solemn face.

"I need to talk to you," he said quietly, brown, pleading eyes brooking no room for argument.

"Yeah, okay," Will answered just as quietly, feeling his already panicked heart kicking up a notch.

They started down the hall but their mom's voice made their steps falter.

"Hey, where are you boys going? We were just about to play *Guess Who?*"

"Um, I need Will's help in the toolshed," Jonathan replied stiltedly and tugged Will along before this excuse could be scrutinized.

Will still heard his mom, puzzled, asking, "Why does everyone need Will's help in the shed? When did Will become the shed expert?"

Will hugged himself against the cold as his brother shut the rickety shed door behind them and he felt the distinct stab of déjà-vu.

"What the hell's going on, Will?" Jonathan hissed and the sense of déjà-vu intensified.

"You know El's probably listening to this right?" Will asked instead because honestly, like they could keep anything secret from her by going into a shed.

"No, she's not, she's playing *Guess Who?* with Mom." Fair point. She did need at least a minimal amount of concentration to pull off her scrying trick. "Are you gonna tell me what's going on with you and Mike or are you gonna play dumb? Like that's ever worked with me before."

"Look, it's complicated," Will started, because it was. "Things aren't what I thought they were and Mike and I, I don't know, we're... seeing each other? I guess? Kind of?"

"What the hell, Will?" It's utterly unfair how wounded Jonathan looked, as if he were a lover who'd found him sleeping with someone else. "How can you *date* that asshole, after everything he did to you? I was there, Will, when he tore your heart out. You forget that. I was the one who spent all night on the phone with you talking you down, listening to you cry and get sick over him. How could you even let him *touch* you?"

The disgust in Jonathan's voice made anger prickles along Will's skin and he felt the need to leap to Mike's defense. "It wasn't like that," he snapped, then realized belatedly how weak that sounded.

"Oh?" Jonathan scoffed. "How was it? He didn't tell you to stay the fuck away from him after you kissed him? He didn't call you a fag and tell you he couldn't stand to look at you?"

"Shut up, Jonathan." His jaw clicked shut right after he yelled it. He'd never told his brother to shut up before. They'd hardly ever fought before. The look of betrayal that flashed across his brother's face twisted the knife of guilt into Will's gut. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean- You're right, he was shitty to me, but it's not like that, like how I thought. He liked me, a lot - too much, or something, I don't know, it's still kind of stupid, but the point is he never really thought those things about me and he's really sorry, about everything, and he

*wants to be with me* - Jonathan, this is really, really important to me, okay?"

Will's voice pitched up at the end of his breathless rant, to the point where he sounded whiny and childish but he didn't care. He needed Jonathan to support him in this the way he supported him in everything. He hadn't been able to accomplish anything in his life without Jonathan there beside him, and if his brother didn't have his back on this decision to give Mike a chance, he didn't think he'd be able to handle it.

The anger and hurt had gone out of Jonathan's expression but the edges of him hadn't softened. He was shaking his head in that vague way that suggested he didn't notice he was doing it. Will felt his heart settling into the pit of his stomach. "Look, I get it, okay?" he said after a while in a way that told Will it clearly pained him to understand it. "You've been in love with him most of your life, of course you're gonna jump at a chance to be with him when he shows interest in you, but this is a bad idea." Will opened his mouth to protest but Jonathan cut him off. "He's not a good guy. You and everybody can go around thinking he's a saint all you want, everyone always did, but he's selfish. Only a selfish asshole hurts his best friend the way he did. Only a selfish asshole would rather be fighting fucking Demogorgon's instead of having everyone be safe."

Will felt his face scrunch up in confusion. That was something Mike had only just told him today and he couldn't fathom how his brother could've known. Jonathan replied to Will's expression with an offhanded, "Nancy."

Oh. Duh. Obviously.

"Point is," Jonathan continued. "As soon as he gets bored, he's gonna bail. That's what he does. He can't handle normal and I know you, all you've ever wanted is normal. Everything's new and exciting now, because you're not out to our folks and the two of you are sneaking around. As soon as that's over..." He drifted off, letting the expectation hang heavy in the air. "I can't watch you go through that again."

"I get that you're worried about me," Will began.

"I'm your big brother," Jonathan half-smirked in his shy way. "It's kind of my job."

"I know, and I love you, but you don't have to. I'm not a kid anymore. I know what I'm doing. I can handle this. I can handle Mike. Do you trust me?"

"I trust you. It's Mike I don't trust."

Will exhaled through his nose. "You don't have to. Just don't... *hate* him. Okay? For me?"

Some of the tension had bled from Jonathan and he allowed himself a genuine, if small, smile. "I'll try," he said. "No promises though."

Will hugged him about the shoulders in an awkward sibling embrace, with Jonathan patting his back solidly.

"I love you too, buddy," Jonathan said.

It wasn't quite the support Will had hoped for, but he'd gotten so much from his brother over the years, the least he could do was reserve him the right to dislike his boyfriend. No, not boyfriend. Boy, who was his friend, who he was probably going to sleep with. Yeah. That.

"Are you going tell me what's wrong?" Will finally asked from the bed after watching Darius tear apart their luggage for twenty minutes looking for his walkman.

"Nothing," Darius hedged, thrashing about in his suitcase for the fifth time. "I just want to fall asleep listening to Run-DMC, is that a crime?"

"Yes, because you didn't bring your Run-DMC tape," Will countered with a wryly arched eyebrow. "You only brought Public Enemy and the Smashing Pumpkins for the car." He leveled two fingers in Darius' direction, mimicking a gun. "You're under arrest."

Darius straightened and for a moment Will thought he was going to



laugh it off, hold up his hands in mock surrender and tell him he wasn't fit for prison (this was a familiar joke between them). Instead he just rested fidgeting fingers on his hips and breathed a heavy sigh through his nose.

Will watched him with trepidation. He'd known this conversation was coming, but that didn't mean he wanted to have it. He lowered his fingers from their shooting position and brought his knees up to his chest under the blankets. "Are you going to tell me now?"

"I don't like that guy," Darius said bluntly.

Wow , Will marveled. *That didn't take a lot of prompting .*

"Mike," Will supplied.

"I know what he did to you."

Will felt his heart take an extra beat. He couldn't bring himself to lie and ask *what do you mean?*

Off his look Darius said, "Yeah, I talked to Jane. You don't think I was worried when you came in looking like someone'd just died?"

"What-" Will had to swallow before he continued. "What did she say?"

"That you had more than some kid crush on him. And he broke your heart."

*Is that all she said?* He wanted to ask but didn't. Instead, he nodded, as if he'd expected to hear that.

"He's just so..." Darius' amorphous anger fizzled out in his search for descriptors. He scrubbed his hands over his close shorn hair, as if trying to rattle out the right words. After a pause he said, "I don't like the way he looks at you."

Will almost smiled at that. "What do you mean? How does he look at me?"

"I don't know, like he wants to cook you at three-hundred and fifty

degrees and serve you with a lemon wedge.”

“Tasty.”

“Come on,” Darius pleaded with a withering look.

“Okay,” Will said, trying to wipe the amusement out of his voice. “But you have to realize that you’re not making a lot of sense. Those aren’t exactly reasons to not like someone. You don’t even know him.”

“I know he hurt you. That’s all I have to know.”

“We were just kids. He was scared, I was scared. We were idiots. We’re adults now. Things are different. *He* ’s different.” He added earnestly, “Mike’s not a bad guy.” Darius looked like he was about to debate this so Will extended a hand out towards him. “Come here.”

Darius came close enough to let Will grab a fistful of his thermal tee and drag him down to sit on the bed. He wrapped his arms around his friend’s broad shoulders and tucked his head under his chin.

“Thank you for worrying about me,” Will said quietly.

“I love worrying about you, Billy Bear.” Darius’ fingers had found their way to Will’s hair and were gently carding through it.

“But you don’t have to.”

“Hey.” Darius tugged on his hair until Will was looking up at him. He was relieved to see a smile playing around his lips. “You let me worry about worrying.”

“Then what should I worry about?”

“Not a damn thing.” And he kissed him sweetly on the tip of his nose.

Breakfast was more of an ordeal than usual with so many people. They were mostly left to their own devices to reheat last night’s leftovers or pour themselves cereal or, in El’s case, toast waffles.

Because breakfast was always an informal thing in the Byers' household they were allowed to watch TV and sit wherever they liked, which was fortunate considering there were too many of them to fit comfortably around the dining room table.

El, as usual, was in charge of their electronic entertainment and left no room for argument about what they would be watching on TV, which turned out to be old *21 Jump Street* reruns, a show that would forever remind Will painfully of Mike. Though the pain he was accustomed to feeling when laying eyes upon Johnny Depp was chased away quick as smoke by an almost-unpleasant flood of butterflies in his middle. Pain replaced with possibility. It was an exciting way to start the morning, when last night's events were awash in the pale light of day and regret was a specter pacing behind the doors of his mind waiting for a chance to bolt through and say *I told you so* .

After breakfast there was no hurry for anything and they lounged a while longer, letting the *Jump Street* reruns bleed into *Roseanne* reruns while Mom started preparing the kitchen for the laborious Christmas Eve dinner that would soon detonate there. El stretched languidly on the couch across Jonathan and Will's laps, something that was likely uncomfortable for all involved but too affectionate a display of intimacy among the siblings for any of them to move. Will would be lying if he said he didn't miss this, having all his family surrounding him, the warmth and security of his home, their unconditional support, even if they disagreed with his choices. He knew he had a soft place to fall if he tripped over his feet on the life high-wire.

He looked to Darius during a commercial and their gazes held. He wanted to convey without words how infinitely happy he was in this moment, and how much he appreciated it for exactly how fragile and fleeting it was, how it could be torn from him at any moment, as it often had been when he was a child. He didn't know if he managed to get any of these ideas across to his friend, but Darius smiled a small, secret smile and Will felt that he had understood somehow all the same.

Eventually, El's shoulder was beginning to feel painful against his over-full bladder and he tried to squeeze himself out from under her

as unobtrusively as possible. She acted as offended as a cat rubbed the wrong way and curled up into his now unoccupied seat with a brattish air of triumph. Will shook his head at her and went to relieve himself. He was still in the bathroom when he heard the phone ring. The sound meant nothing at first, just a common, household sound, as easily ignorable as the microwave beeping or the white-noise chatter of the TV. But his heart kicked up a notch when he realized with a start that it could be Mike, calling him like he'd repeatedly promised.

From outside, Will heard Jonathan holler, "I'll get it!"

He splashed water on his hands as quickly as he could and sprung open the bathroom door, ready to leap to beat his brother to the phone not more than five feet away. Will stopped short in the doorway, Jonathan already speaking quietly into the receiver, his back to Will. But it was the tone in Jonathan's voice that gave him pause. On a sudden impulse he ducked back into the bathroom, back flat against the open door and shamelessly eavesdropped.

"-whatever happened between you is none of my business," Jonathan was saying in a surreptitiously low voice. "But, Mike, he's my kid brother."

There was a pause, during which Jonathan listened and Mike presumably spoke.

"I know. And I want to believe that. Just..." A hissed breath. "He's been through a lot. You know that, almost better than anyone. You were there."

Another pause.

"Yeah but, I don't think he could handle it." Jonathan dropped his voice lower still and Will strained his ears to catch his next words. "You don't know what it was like, having to be in the hospital with him. If this isn't something you can do, and if you care about him at all, just let him go."

Will wanted to burst out then, scream at his brother, tell him it really *wasn't* any of his business, that he and Mike could do whatever they

wanted to as two consenting adults, that it didn't have to mean anything if Mike didn't want it to. He wanted to grab Jonathan by the shoulders and shake him, take the phone from him and beg Mike not to listen to him. He was getting what he wanted, they both were. Why was Jonathan trying to ruin this for him?

But he didn't burst out. He stayed rooted to the spot, like the coward that he was. He stayed and he listened.

The pause dragged longer than Will thought he could bear. Finally, he heard Jonathan sigh, a ruffle of fabric like he was moving. "Okay," he said, sounding defeated. "Okay." With unexpected amusement he added, "You know if you hurt him, I still have that bat full of nails..."

There was a pause just long enough for Mike to exhale a breathy laugh and Jonathan suddenly called out, loud enough to make Will jump a meter into the air, "Will! It's Mike!"

Will scrambled over to the sink and turned on the tap, yelling over the sound of rushing water, "One second!"

To add credibility to the sham, and because he had no idea how long it took to wash his hands, he actually washed his hands and dried them before stepping out into the hall.

He took the headset from Jonathan, who looked as untroubled as if he'd just picked up. It was an effort not to let it show on his face that he'd heard the exchange and was resenting Jonathan for it. Then he remembered he was about to talk to Mike and his blood pressure spiked.

He cleared his throat unnecessarily before lifting the phone to his ear, leaning as casually as he could against the wall, as if striking a pose that Mike might see. "Hey." His voice sounded embarrassingly breathy to his own ears.

"Hey." Hearing Mike's husky voice made Will's nerve endings tingle all over, like when your foot goes to sleep, but to your entire body. "What're you up to?"

“Oh, you know.” God, he was awful at sounding casual. He lifted an arm to lean more strategically against the wall, as if by adopting progressively more casual poses he might infuse some of it into his voice. “Nothin’. You?”

“My, uh, parents went to Indianapolis this morning,” he said, heavy *entendre* layered under the words. “With Holly, to go visit my great aunt Esther.” A pause for effect. “I’ve got the whole place to myself.” Another pause, this one to make sure his meaning hadn’t been mistaken. “I thought you might like to come over and... hang out. Together.”

Will felt saliva rush into his mouth, blood into his crotch. “Oh, y-yeah,” he squeaked, any semblance of nonchalance lost. “Yes - yeah. I’d like that.”

“I’d like that too.” Mike’s smile was audible.

“Right now?”

“Sure. I mean, if you’re not busy.”

“Not even a little.”

“Good. Great.” The smile was big enough to almost be laughter. “Awesome. So, I’ll see you soon.”

“Definitely.”

“Great,” he repeated. “Okay... bye.”

“Bye.” He could feel the reluctance in them both to hang up first. He overreacted to the moment by slamming the headset down a little too hard on the cradle.

“I’m going out,” he announced summarily as he was already snatching up his parka by the door.

“You’re going?” His mom asked from the kitchen sink where she’d been viciously scrubbing the morning’s dishes. “Where’re you going?”

“Um, to hang out with Mike for a bit,” he replied, avoiding Darius’

eye. And Jonathan's. And El's. He ended up just staring at his boots.

"Oh, that's nice," Mom's voice instantly thawed, an ice cube in the sun on a hot day. "Tell him I said hi. And tell Karen that we're still on for bridge next Sunday."

"I will," Will said, omitting that with any luck he wouldn't be seeing Karen Wheeler at all.

"And pick up a bag of peas from Bradley's while you're out!"

"I will!" He was out the door and in the rental Geo before another word could be spoken, his feet barely touching the ground.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Thank you all for your continued support and love!  
You all keep me going <3 I look forward every week  
to bringing you new content to enjoy and brighten  
your days. I hope you liked this latest installation.  
Stay tuned for next week's chapter!

## 6. Part VI: Fresh Blood

### Notes for the Chapter:

WARNING: Graphic descriptions of sexual acts. Explicit rating very much in use in this chapter. Proceed at your own sexy, sexy risk.

## Part VI: Fresh Blood

It had snowed during the night, leaving the world blanketed in white so pure it seemed to swallow shadows and leave Hawkins in stark monochromatic relief. White snow, black trees. White snow, black asphalt. White snow, black buildings. There was a surreal hush over the town, like all of Hawkins was holding its breath in awe over its own romantic beauty. Driving through the woods, and then through the Christmas lulled town, felt freeing to Will, like diving deep into an ocean. Half of him wanted to keep on driving, drive all the way to Michigan, all the way to Canada, nothing but snow and silence on all sides. The other half of him, the stronger half, was buzzing in anticipation to get to Mike, to be alone with him, to let him press him against the door and ravish his mouth, his body. He'd had a taste of Mike and now he wanted all of him. All of him, all of him. Inside him, around him, under him, on top of him, within, without. All of him, all of him.

The Wheeler house was salt-shaker picturesque, filigreed in frost and trimmed in tasteful Christmas lights. True to his word, there was only Mike's sleek Pontiac in the driveway, looking pastry perfect under its powder coating. Will stalled on the front steps, enjoying the bite of cold, and the way his hands shook in his pockets from something entirely unrelated to it. He could turn around right now, he realized. He could get back in the Geo and go home, or to Michigan, or to Canada. No one was forcing him to go inside. In fact, no one would blame him if he fled. *Mike's bad news*, they said. *He's not good for you. He'll tear your heart out.* Leaving would be the smart thing to do. Leave now while he still had his dignity and heart mostly intact. It would be so easy.



No. It wouldn't be easy. Leaving was never an option for Will, not really. Not where Mike was concerned. He had as much ability to withstand Mike's pull as he did the pull of gravity. Mike had been pulling him to him since they were five years old.

Will's gloved finger rang the doorbell.

Not two breaths later, Mike opened the door.

They stood looking at each other. Will couldn't take his eyes off the flush against his cheeks from the sudden scrape of cold air, or the red of his lips parted in a silent gasp, or the place where creamy white skin disappeared under the collar of his black henley. He wanted to put his mouth there.

"Hi," Mike finally said, more air than words.

"Hi," Will parroted back.

Mike stood aside, pulling the door open wide enough to let Will through.

It was harder to hang up his parka than he would have liked given the trembling of his hands. When he turned around, Mike was there, standing closer than social etiquette allowed. Will wasn't sure anymore which one of their bodies was doing the trembling. In the bright white light of midday Will could make out every individual freckle splashed liberally across Mike's face. He wanted to kiss each and every one of them.

"Do you want something to drink?" Mike asked.

Will found himself unable to speak from a sudden dryness in his throat. He shrugged jerkily instead. Was it his heart thudding so loudly or was it Mike's?

Whatever distance had been between them had closed somehow. You couldn't have slid a piece of paper between their bodies. Will felt fingers hovering just out of reach beside his hand dangling at his side.

"Do you want to watch a movie?"

Will shrugged again, his gaze fixed somewhere around the dip between Mike's tantalizingly exposed clavicles. He couldn't bring himself to meet that intense, all consuming, black void stare.

Fingers came gently under Will's chin and tipped his head up until he was forced to look at him. He was drowning, drowning, in that inky stare. He felt it everywhere, more than he'd ever felt anyone's hands on him, more than he'd felt the Mind Flayer flaying him apart. He felt it in his core. He was raw, vulnerable, exposed in front of it. *Swallow me* , Will thought desperately. *Drown me. Take all of me.*

"What do you want?" The words ghosted over Will's lips as they were spoken, not unkindly. Curious, almost. Full of wonder. Like he couldn't believe what Will might be here for.

*Isn't it obvious?* Will wanted to laugh. *Isn't it the first thing you see when you look at me? I want you to swallow me whole.*

Will's heart was hammering so hard in his throat it was choking him. How could he possibly be this nervous when they'd already kissed, jacked each other off? This was nuts. He was braver than this. He was Will fucking Byers, he'd lived through hell and survived. How was he so undone by one boy? One beautiful, amazing, incredibly boy.

*Swallow me .*

Instead he whimpered, "Mike."

Unrelenting, cold wood against his back. Mike's hot hands under his shirt, hot mouth on his neck, muscled thigh between his pushing against the already straining hardness in jeans.

" *Mike* ," he mewled, fists bunched in the back of his shirt, head thrown back against the door.

Tongue in his ear, teeth on his earlobe, tickling breath against damp skin, nails scratching down his back. "I want you so bad it's killing me."

Will had forgotten how to breathe. Maybe he'd never known how. *He* wanted him so bad it was killing him? Will was going blind from it, deaf from it. He was melting and exploding from it. The wanting was

a real thing inside him, like the Demogorgon slug, wriggling and writhing inside him, ready to burst out of his chest. He wanted and wanted and wanted. There was no bottom to the depths of his wanting. He could drown in him and still be thirsty. He could get all of Mike and then some and never be full of him.

Because he didn't know how to say it with words, he gripped Mike by his thick, curling hair, tugged his face free, and kissed him. He plunged his tongue into his mouth as far he could manage, farther still. If Mike couldn't swallow him, he would swallow Mike.

Mike's moan reverberated through his body. Will could feel it in his toes, the ends of his hair.

They were moving, tripping over each other's feet, not caring if they fell or what they hit. Mike's shirt had magically disappeared, though Will couldn't remember ever breaking their kiss. Skin, skin, skin. He had to touch all of it. He needed his mouth over every inch of it.

Mike panted as Will left wet trails down the smooth expanse of his chest, sucked in a harsh breath when Will took one of his pebbled pink nipples into his mouth. Their backward shuffle stopped abruptly when Mike's foot caught the bottom-most step and their momentum sent them sprawling over the stairs. Will never even felt the impact.

He was tracing the sparse line of dark hair down Mike's flat stomach, to the tender flesh just above his waistband. He was trying to pop open the button of Mike's jeans when he felt the tugging of his sweater and let Mike pull it over his head. He shivered as the cool air crawled across his feverish skin, and he shivered when Mike pulled him up to lavish kisses all across his collarbones and shoulders, his arms, his chest, his belly, everywhere, everywhere.

One of Mike's hands finally cupped him through his jeans and he cried out as if burned, so hard inside the confines of his pants that it was almost painful.

"Mike," Will whined pathetically, unable to ask for what he needed most.

"Fuck, Will," Mike groaned in answer, pressing the pad of his thumb

against the head of Will's cock through the thick fabric.

Will writhed, one hand catching on a balustrade, the other around the nape of Mike's neck. He made the most undignified noise he'd ever heard himself make.

His hand was gone in an instant, landing instead on his fly and quickly relieving the pressure against Will's throbbing cock. He yanked down Will's shorts and jeans until they were tangled around his ankles. He felt so wonderfully, horribly exposed, his bare ass pressed against carpeting. It felt filthy and sexy and the way Mike was looking at him, all dark hunger and barely restrained lust, made Will's cock throb where it lay against his belly.

Then Mike's mouth was on him, around him, sucking, tongue swirling, hot and wet and God, oh God, oh God. Will's hips were canting in time with the bobbing of Mike's head, lifted up off the step, the muscles in his stomach trembling as his abdomen strained. It was impossible that anything could feel as good as Mike's lips wrapped around his dick, the slick wetness of his tongue as it laved at the underside of his shaft, pressed into the slit of the head, licked up the beads of precum as they formed.

Will's thighs were shaking from the pleasure of it, his throat contracting on the whimpers and moans and cries that tore through him to the point that he wasn't even aware he was making them, they just blended in with the white noise of blood rushing past his ears. He didn't think he could contain the pleasure inside him, it was bigger than he was. He was drowning in it. Swallowed by it. His body had disappeared, every nerve ending in his being narrowed down to the single space where Mike's mouth touched his aching flesh.

"Mike, Mike, Mike" he could distantly hear himself chanting in gasps, like a prayer, like a mantra, like Mike's name had replaced his own breathing. "*Mike, Mike, Mike* ."

Through the abyss of pleasure Will was lost in, floating in, he felt saliva slick fingers tracing down behind his balls and prodding at his entrance, his skin so sensitive from his building orgasm that the touches sent blinding sparks of pleasure coursing through his belly. The first finger that pushed into him was such a satisfying invasion

that he threw his head back against the carpeted steps and keened pitifully, suddenly wanting and needing like he'd never wanted or needed anything in his life before to be filled by Mike, to feel him inside every crevice and hollow of his body, to be filled to bursting with him.

By the time Mike had slipped two fingers inside him, stretching him with a delicious burn, and grazed the tight bundle of nerves there, he thought he was going to die from it. It was altogether too much. The unrelenting sucking, the tight swallow of Mike's throat around his cock, and the mind-numbing, brain-bursting pleasure massaging his prostate, were too much, too fast, too hard. He squirmed trying to get away from one only to find himself pressed into the other, whining and crying out in a pleasure that was so great it was practically agony.

He gripped Mike's hair so hard he knew it must hurt viciously, but Mike only groaned, deep and animalistic in his throat. The vibrations it sent through Will's dick pushed him clear over the edge. He didn't even have time to warn him. The fire that had been building in his belly, behind his balls, scorching his insides, rose to a fever pitch that took him entirely by surprise, bodily torn from him as if ripped out by force. His back arched close to snapping, nothing but his thrown back head left on the stairs, and time stood perfectly still as he came and came and came and Mike swallowed and swallowed and swallowed until there was nothing left, not even Will, just a hollow space in the world where Will had once been. Mike had swallowed him whole.

The world came back to Will in bits and pieces, first sound filtering in and then shades of light and dark, and finally color, as though a bomb had gone off, leaving a ringing sound behind in his ears and his vision swimming. The last thing to return was the sensation of his own body, which he was surprised to find still existed. He could feel the rough scrape of the carpeting against his ass, where he knew in a distant way that he would have a terrible case of rug burn soon. He could feel the numbness of his fingers still wrapped around the balustrade. He released them one by one, each one stiff and complaining and tingling as blood rushed back into them. He felt the throbbing at the back of his head where he knew he'd have a raised

bump. Lastly, he felt the open mouthed, wet kisses Mike was trailing up and down the insides of his thighs, hands idly caressing Will's hips, his stomach, his chest.

While Will's breathing and pulse returned to normal, he took a moment to enjoy the view now that he wasn't lust addled. Mike's bowed head, entirely obscured by the mop of dark hair that tickled Will's sweat damp skin. The sharply angled planes of his shoulder blades where they jutted out from the porcelain expanse of his slender back, dotted playfully by wayward constellations of moles and coy freckles. He enjoyed the thin red welts that had sprung up on that unmarred skin from Will's nails. He watched the swell of Mike's ass in his mouth-wateringly tight black jeans, the way his muscles moved under denim as he re-adjusted his position to get better access to the underside of Will's knee.

There was something warm blossoming in Will's chest that had nothing to do with arousal. There were so many years during which Will had thought it impossible that he would ever see Mike like this, between his thighs, with the faintest glistening trace of Will's come in the corner of his mouth, cheeks ruddy with desire. After their fight, he wouldn't ever dare dream of it. But here he was. Here they were. He had his best friend back, and he had him in every way he'd wanted since he was fourteen. Mike had *him* in every way Will had wanted since he was fourteen. Not just that, but there was such genuine tenderness in the lust fueled kissed Mike was bestowing upon him. Something that spoke volumes more than words ever could. It wasn't just a crush for Will. It never had been. And more than just having Mike, he'd never dared dream that Mike could want him in any way beyond that. And even though he wasn't saying it, Will could feel it - or he hoped that's what he could feel - in the minute trembles running up and down Mike's arms, in the press of his lips to Will's knee, in the gentle caress at the inside of his elbow. He could feel that it was more for Mike too.

*Please let it be more for him too* , Will thought desperately all of a sudden. *I don't think I could handle it if it wasn't. Not now. Not anymore.*

"Come here," Will said, his voice surprisingly hoarse. He must've been crying out louder than he'd thought.

Mike looked up at him through a curtain of dark hair. Will pushed it gently off his forehead only for it to fall back into his eyes immediately.

“What?” Mike asked, the corners of his lips quirked up.

It was then Will realized he was grinning like an idiot. He shrugged, unable to wipe the smile off his face.

“What?” Mike repeated, his own lips stretching into that gorgeous, unselfconscious smile, as he dragged himself lazily up Will’s body and caught his mouth in a kiss that was mostly teeth.

That succeeded in turning Will’s grin into a chuckle and then a full blown laugh. Mike laughed with him, even as he tried to kiss the laugh away.

“ *What ?*” Mike insisted breathlessly between kisses.

“I’m just happy,” Will confessed.

Mike rested his elbows on the step by Will’s head, hovering just above him. The look he gave Will was a curious one, full of too many emotions to accurately parse through. But there was a definite softening of his features. It was evident in the way the lines around his eyes evaporated. The hunger in their black depths was tempered by something sweet and undefinable.

“I’m happy too,” he said softly.

Will swallowed hard around something that was suddenly stuck in his throat. He didn’t know how to ask him if he really meant that. He couldn’t even tell by looking at him if he really meant it or not. He didn’t know how much he was really seeing and how much he was just projecting. *Please let it be more .*

Instead, Will repeated, “Come here.”

He chased the taste of himself in Mike’s mouth. It was a disgusting sort of thrill that he had always enjoyed. It didn’t take very long at all before Mike grew restless above him, their kiss becoming heated as Mike thrust his tongue into Will’s mouth as though he were fucking it

and his hips rocked down against Will's pelvis, his still trapped erection grinding into Will's stomach.

Will pushed back on Mike's shoulders and rolled them until their positions were reversed. Mike eagerly unbuttoned and unzipped his own jeans, shimmying out of them with a charming lack of grace. His hands found Will's shoulders as soon as they were free, kneading the muscles there restlessly, his breathing already ragged in anticipation.

Will felt his mouth flood with saliva as he fisted Mike's cock, heavy and hot in his hand. The hole he'd thought he'd plugged in himself when Mike had sucked him off, contentment from being filled, was chased away as if it had never been full, never even come close. He was overcome with the need for Mike to fill every crevice of him. He didn't know, now, if that need would ever be sated. He might spend the rest of his life needing to be filled by him, no matter how many times Mike tried. Mike might wear Will as if he were his own skin and still Will wouldn't be satisfied.

He swallowed Mike down without preamble, taking him as far back as he could tolerate, wanting all of him, wanting him inside him, wanting to please him in every way he'd pleased Will and then some.

Mike grunted, a startled, almost pained sound, head falling soundlessly back against the carpeting. His fingers were digging into Will's shoulders to the point of hurting but Will welcomed it, just like he welcomed the tang that burst on his tongue and seeped down the back of his throat, just like he welcomed the trembling in Mike's arms and thighs.

Will pulled back as much as he dared then hollowed out his cheeks and sucked the head of Mike's cock for all he was worth. He sucked until he heard Mike cry out, "Jesus *fuck* - Will - Jesus - " and he sucked more, and more and more and didn't stop until he felt Mike thrashing under him, hips making jerky, futile little thrusts to get more of Will, more, more, more, and he cried out, "Jesus, you're gonna kill me - Will - shit - shit shit shit - please - *please* -" Only then did he relent, letting go of where he had Mike's hip pinned and his cock firmly grasped. He let go and didn't move. He let Mike's hips take him where he wanted, shoving himself hard up into Will's slack mouth. The tip of Mike's dick hit the back of his throat and it took



every ounce of his concentration not to gag.

It was worth it for the full bodied moan that Mike let out. Will would've smiled if he weren't still trying not to retch.

He let Mike's hips do all the work, let him fuck his mouth like he wanted Mike to fuck him, his cock slipping slickly past his pliant lips, the stairs creaking under them from Mike's exertion.

Will couldn't help looking up at him. A mottled flush had crept across his chest and neck like fresh blood on snow. Will could see the tendons standing out on his neck from the strain, could see the ripple of muscles under the taut skin of his belly, could see the indolent splay of his lashes against his cheeks. How he loved those lashes. How he loved watching Mike fuck his mouth.

He was gasping and grunting like someone running a marathon, words barely sneaking out between them, incoherent and broken like words torn from a dream. "Shit - shit - Will - fuck - yeah - God, that's so good - you're so fucking good - Jesus - Will -"

And then he heard Mike's breath hitch, caught as if in a too-tight chest, felt the way his thrusts stuttered and shallowed, losing rhythm and grace, and he knew he was there, right on the edge. A selfish part of Will wanted to pull off, tease, drag it out torturously, make Mike need him in a way he'd never needed anyone. But a bigger part of Will wanted to swallow everything Mike could give him, fill him the way he wanted to be filled. He wanted to take away a piece of Mike inside him, so even if this all fell away he'd know that he'd kept a part of him, that a part of him had become a part of Will, inexorable, as intricate a part of Will as his own DNA.

One of Mike's hands detached to scrub through Will's hair, bury in the short hairs at the back and tug, insistently. When Will didn't move, Mike panted brokenly, "I - Will - I'm gonna c- I'm gonna come -"

Will pressed Mike's hips back into the stairs and bobbed his head as fast as he could manage, keeping his lips and tongue tight around his shaft, unrelenting in his speed and strength so that Mike was whining and keening and trembling and in a matter of seconds Will's mouth

was flooded with his orgasm, the salty funk of it satisfying in a way Will would never be able to describe. He made sure to give Mike the same treatment he had offered Will. He swallowed every drop of him, every endless spurt as Mike spasmed and shivered against the stairs. He felt the warmth of it coarse down his throat and settle in his belly. He felt Mike become a part of him and fill him completely, if ever so briefly. Every crevice lit up with him, a light shined in every dark place that lived inside of Will, chasing out every monster and nightmare, scrubbing away every trace of the Mind Flayer and the Demogorgon and the Upside Down and Hawkins until he was fresh and free for the first time in years.

*I love you , Will thought. I love you, I love you, I love you, Mike. I love you.*

When it was done, he wiped the spit and escaped come from his lips with the back of his hand and cherished the sight of Mike sprawled across the Wheeler house stairs, all gangly, limp limbs, his chest heaving and still flushed, his hair a bird's nest mess across the tacky blue carpeting. He looked so thoroughly fucked and Will loved every single inch of him in that moment.

"What," Mike panted, his dark eyes glassy. "Are you smiling at?"

"You," Will said without thinking, then laughed at himself.

Mike summoned up enough energy to trace his fingers along Will's jaw. "Do you have any idea how amazing you are?"

Unable to say anything to that, Will just shook his head.

Mike's summoned strength fled him and his hand fell heavily back against the carpet. "God, you're... Where did you learn to do that?"

Will smirked, preening. "I've had some practice."

A shadow chased across Mike's features, blink and you miss it. "Yeah, you told me. Darius."

"Well, not *just* Darius."

Mike worried his lip between his teeth. "So you've, uh, been with a

lot of guys?”

The forced nonchalance of the question infinitely amused Will. It wasn't like he hadn't already told Mike about his exes. "Some."

Will crawled up to rest beside Mike, just now realizing how incredibly uncomfortable stairs are to lie down on. He laid an arm haphazardly across Mike's stomach, enjoying the way it rose and fell with his breathing. They both still had their pants pooled around their ankles and shoes still on, but Will couldn't be bothered to care.

He gnawed playfully at Mike's shoulder, leaving behind a light impression of his teeth which he watched fade gradually before his eyes. "What about you? How'd you get so good?"

Without looking at him, Mike's lips quirked. "Practice," he echoed.

Will was entirely unprepared for the wave of jealousy that shot through him, lightning fast and scorching, making every muscle in his body tense. It was dramatic enough that Mike noticed and shifted to face him, brow furrowing in concern.

Will couldn't even find it in himself to mimic Mike's earlier forced nonchalance. "Oh."

"Hey," Mike said, suddenly serious. "It's not like they..." He paused, reassessing what he wanted to say. "I had to figure myself out, you know? I had to come to terms with the fact that I could be attracted to guys and still be attracted to girls."

"So you experimented."

"Yeah - well, no. Okay, yes," he pushed a hand through his hair, shoving it out of his eyes as he grew frustrated with himself. "Sort of. It started out that way. But I didn't just want to know if I wanted other guys the same way I wanted girls, I wanted to know if I could *feel* something too, like I had with El and with you-" He broke off his sentence suddenly, as if his words had caught him by surprise. He took a calculated risk and continued speaking as if he hadn't said something that had just made Will's world tip sideways. "I wanted to know if it was a fluke. But it turns out it wasn't. And yeah, I felt

something for a few guys, but it didn't work out. I'm not seeing anyone now, though," he added with emphasis, searching Will's face. "Not guys or girls."

Will tried to still his heart and force some levity back into the air around them. He gave Mike's torso a companionable shake. "So you're one of those bisexuals I've heard so much about."

Mike laughed, relieved. "Guess I am." He leaned in to kiss him but stopped just shy of their mouths meeting. "And you're not seeing anyone either, right...?"

"Well," Will dragged out the word, teasing. "I'm kinda seeing this one guy right now." He waited just a second for Mike's face to fall before adding, "He's kind of this huge dork that I had a crush on in high school. I'm not sure if it's serious yet, but I really want to see where it goes."

The way Mike's face lit up made the little prank totally worth it. "I guess I'm kind of seeing someone too, then," he grinned.

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. He's this little shit who drove me crazy as a kid."

"A little shit, huh?"

"Yup. He's about five foot five, brown hair, ridiculously gorgeous hazel eyes."

"Gorgeous, huh?"

"Totally."

"Sounds dreamy."

"You have no idea." Mike's smile slipped and something worked its way into his eyes, something like fear mingled with hope. When he opened his mouth to speak, Will held his breath, not daring to dream. "Will. I-"

"I'm home!"

And that's when Nancy burst through the front door and sent a blast of ball-shriveling cold air over their naked bodies.

## 7. Part VII: Are You Sure?

### Notes for the Chapter:

Continued content warning: Explicit descriptions of sexual acts.

(Strap in, because this chapter is a long one)

## Part VII: Are You Sure?

“Mike, what the fuck!”

“Fucking-A, Nancy! You were supposed to call when you got here!”

“This is my fucking house! Oh my God, put some *clothes on* - Will? Will Byers?”

Everything had been scrambling for clothes and yanking on clothes and trying to find misplaced clothes. Will had managed to get his pants and sweater back on but Mike’s shirt had somehow ended up flung into the living room so he’d made the executive decision to pull up his jeans and hover his hands in front of his crotch to discreetly shield his semi-erection from his sister’s view. Will had been actively engaged in the act of disappearing into the wallpaper while hiding behind Mike when Nancy identified him. Will didn’t think he’d ever been so mortified in his life.

Nancy was ruddy cheeked and wild eyed, her hair a mess from traveling and her overnight bag still slung around her shoulder over a puffy bomber jacket. She looked nice, but Will didn’t feel inclined to tell her that. In fact, the only thing he felt inclined to do was jump out the window.

He gave a half-hearted wiggle of his fingers over Mike’s shoulders in lieu of a greeting.

“You weren’t supposed to get here until five,” Mike was still arguing. The back of his neck was flushed red, and Will knew that his own face probably wasn’t faring any better. He just wanted this whole

thing to be over and to never, EVER, speak of it again.

Nancy seemed to have a similar idea. She puffed up her cheeks dramatically and let out a slow, noisy breath that attempted to expel some of her anger and mortification. "Can you move, please? *Now* ? I'd like to go to my room."

"No," Mike said. Both Will and Nancy looked at him as though he'd lost his mind. "We obviously have to talk about this, so let's talk about it now."

"*Talk* about it?" Nancy shrieked. "Mike, I don't even want to *think* about. Can I go to my room now, *please* ?"

"No, come on! You caught me having sex with another guy, we at least need to have a conversation-"

"No, we don't!" Real anger was taking over, displacing whatever embarrassment had still been warring with it. She gestured wildly with her gloved hands. "We don't have to have a 'conversation', we don't have to talk about it, and you know why? Because it's you, Mike. Because this is probably just this month's 'I'm a vegetarian now', or 'I'm going to live in France', or 'I'm goth or punk or whateverthefuck trendy new subculture I've appropriated'! We can have a 'conversation', Mike, when it means something, and it's not just you being you, trying on a different life because you don't have one of your own. The War is over, Mike. There's nothing left for you to kill. Grow up."

She shoved him aside with her bag and stormed up the stairs, leaving scorched earth in her wake. Just when Will thought he could breathe again, she stopped on the landing. Will couldn't bring himself to look directly at her and watched Mike's reddened face instead.

"And you know what? It's really shitty that you brought Will into this. Sorry, Will. You deserve better."

Will listened to her footsteps pound against the stairs, the hallway overhead, and jumped when her bedroom door slammed shut.

Only after that did Mike let his shoulders sag and dragged his hands

over his face, pulling at skin so his features stretched. Will didn't know what he was thinking. He didn't know because he was too busy thinking himself.

He hadn't known any of what Nancy had said. Hadn't known, hadn't wanted to know, hadn't even thought to ask. To Will, Mike didn't exist outside of Hawkins. No one from his childhood did. All of Hawkins existed to Will as if it were a ride at Disneyland, its figures animating only for him and then put away under sheets at night to await his return. It boggled his mind to think that everyone had grown, changed, moved away, gotten married, joined the army, bought cars and houses and dogs. But it was a whole other level of denial when it came to Mike.

For Will, Mike would always be the boy who on one sunny fall day had cut his hair and kissed him back. He would always be the boy who had sat beside him on his mother's couch with an overturned bag of Halloween candy and cried with him because they were both so terribly afraid and needed each other so terribly much. That was the boy Will would always love. He hadn't even considered the fact that he might have changed. No, he hadn't *wanted* him to have changed. Hadn't wanted to lose the boy he'd fallen in love with. He had wanted him to always be out there, somewhere, in the Disneyland ride of Hawkins, exactly the way he'd loved him best, preserved in amber, waiting for Will, always waiting.

But he hadn't stayed the same. He'd gotten taller, broader, gaunter. He had gone off to college. He had experimented with boys. He had been a vegetarian, and a goth, and a punk, and a francophile. It hit Will like the gust of bitter winter air from the front door. This person in front of him, this person whose dick he'd had in his mouth, who just minutes ago he had been convinced he was in love with - he didn't know this person at all.

He'd known seventeen-year-old Mike Wheeler. He'd known everything about him. From his favorite food (peanut butter and jelly sandwiches), to the way his nose wrinkled whenever he got an itch, to the fact he loved his sisters more than he ever said, down to the flecks of gold in his eyes when the light hit them just right, and the tiny scar on the inside of his wrist from when he'd fallen off his bike at age eight. He'd known his favorite recurring dream (being locked



in the grocery store at night and wreaking havoc until morning). He'd known his greatest fear (drowning). There were times when Will was certain he'd known Mike better than he had ever and would ever know himself.

But four years separated that Mike from the Mike before him now. Four years to change out of the person Will had known. He didn't know what this Mike did on his spare time, or where he lived, or what his favorite classes were, or what kind of music he listened to, or what he dreamed of. And the worst part of it all was, he hadn't even bothered to ask. He'd done himself as much of a disservice as he'd done Mike. He'd let himself fall in love with someone who didn't exist anymore. Will deserved better, Nancy had said. She was wrong. Mike deserved better. He deserved someone who cared about him, the *now* him, not someone who was living out fantasies with him because he happened to have the same face as someone Will had known.

Something else that was settling in Will's gut like shards of ice was the fact that he might not even like this new Mike, the one who seemed to change his way of life on a whim because he had no identity of his own. That this entire bisexuality business might just be another one of his phases, something to try on, see how it fits, and move on from when a newer, shinier way of life presented itself. Could he even trust anything Mike had told him? Had there been several boys or only one, and Mike was using that as evidence to proclaim that he was hip, bisexual? Mike had never been much of a liar before, but this was a different Mike, one who might lie routinely. And of course there had been the huge lie, the one he'd screamed at Will in 1987, the one that had kept them apart for four years. Maybe he'd gotten better at it since then. Had he even been pining after Will this whole time, or was that another lie? Who even was this person?

Will had wanted to throw himself out the window before and he did now. Then from mortification, now from the sudden sickness that was welling up in him, the creeping dread he would feel in the Upside Down when the Demogorgon's breathing would carry on the dead air and he knew it was near enough to smell him. The need to get away was paralyzing, tightening his chest until he could barely

drag in a breath.

*Not another panic attack* , he pleaded with himself. *Not here. Not now. Please.*

“Hey.”

Mike voice nearly sent him reeling back against the wall. He looked round wildly and found Mike watching him with concern etched into his features. He had a hand extended like he wanted to touch him but was stopping himself.

“You okay?”

*Act normal* , Will commanded himself. *How do I normally act? Do I always stand like this? What do I do with my hands? He knows something's wrong. He can tell. Act normal. Say something. Why aren't you saying anything?*

“Fine,” Will tried to say, but it came out as choked squeak. Mike's eyes darted down and Will realized his hands were shaking. He tried to shove them inside his pockets but it was as if the pockets had shrunken or his hands had grown because he couldn't jam them in no matter how hard he tried, just sweaty palms skating off denim.

“Will?”

Mike's voice sounded far away, or under water. It was like cotton balls had been rammed into his ears or like a bag was over his head, muffling and suffocating him. He felt hot. Too hot. But it wasn't hot inside the house. It was Mind Flayer hot. The kind where his skin wanted to crawl off his body to let cool air inside.

All at once he was back there. His was in the bathroom, staring down the bathtub as if it were a snake waiting to strike him, steaming water that cloyed at him, searching fingers that wanted to scald him, burn his flesh off. He was back in the pumpkin field when the soldiers had scorched the vines and he'd felt the fire inside, he'd felt it charring his lungs and heart and gut and he thought he was going to die, he'd wanted to die, he'd wanted the Mind Flayer to win and erase everything that made him Will Byers as long as it meant he

didn't have to feel the pain, the searing pain.

*He's back , Will thought madly, his vision swimming. The Mind Flayer's back. He's inside me, he's tearing me apart, he's taking everything. He's back. He's back he's back he's back -*

"Will! Will! " It was Mike's voice, it was shouting, it was a thousand miles away. "Breathe. You have to breathe. Will? Can you hear me?"

There were cool hands on his flaming cheeks. Blurry visions of dark hair and white skin came in and out of focus before him.

"Please, Will. Baby, please. Look at me. Will?"

Hot tears were tracking down his hot face. So hot. It was so hot. He was dizzy as a heat haze rising off tarmac, the world shifting and bucking under him. His stomach was roiling with it. The nausea was sitting in his throat like a crouched frog, keeping the air from reaching his lungs. BOOM BOOM BOOM BOOM BOOM said his heart, faster than wings, louder than shotgun blasts.

"I don't feel well," he heard someone with his voice say. Then the world went dark.

Will came to consciousness with a sock taste in his mouth and a body as sore as if it had been dragged behind a truck. There wasn't a single muscle in his body that wasn't stiff and aching. His eyes had the scratchy, too dry feeling you get from waking up after a nap when you're sick, or the morning after you've cried yourself to sleep.

For a brief moment he thought he could hear the can of pomade, the same one Mike had used to style his hair. *Shhhh Shhhh Shhhh* . But then he realized it was softer, human. Again and again like a wordless mantra. *Shhhh Shhhh Shhhh* .

And fingers were carding through his hair, gentle, soothing. Like his mom used to do when he was sick.

Then he put it together. He knew it just before he opened his eyes.

Mike.

Mike had his head cradled in his lap, shushing and rocking him like he might a baby. Will couldn't get it up to feel embarrassed. He was just tired. So terribly tired.

Mike stopped almost as soon as Will's eyes opened. His face melted from worry to relief faster than Will would've thought possible. He shifted his hand from Will's hair to cup his jaw, thumb rubbing gentle circles on his cheek.

"Hey," he said quietly, the long, drawn out sort that you use for scared children, not sure if they're about to burst into tears or not.

"Hey," Will croaked, the frog still not entirely gone from his throat. He rubbed the heel of his palm into one eye. "How long was I out?"

Mike looked even more relieved, if possible, to hear Will forming coherent sentences. "Not long." He smiled shyly, self-deprecatingly. "You had me pretty worried for a while there."

Will noticed then that Mike was still shirtless and they were still on the stairs. He must've caught him when he swooned and settled on the steps, not daring to move him. The fact that he had stayed with him touched Will in a way he was entirely unprepared for. It tightened his throat for a different reason. Only Jonathan and Darius had ever held him through a panic attack that bad.

"I'm sorry," Will said, unable to meet Mike's eye for fear he would see the tears welling there. He could barely keep the quaver out of his voice as it was. "I usually don't - I have pills for this but I didn't -" He stopped to take a shuddering breath. "I'm sorry," he finished lamely.

"No, no, no, no. Hey," Mike cooed, bringing up another hand so that Will's face was bracketed between his palms. "Hey, it's okay. You're okay."

They sat there in silence for a moment (or, Mike sat and Will lay). Until the strength seemed to go out of Mike's body and he sagged forward, coming to rest his forehead against Will's. It was comforting

in a way Will couldn't explain, his lanky frame a shield over him, protecting him from the world. The warmth of his body was welcome, as the whole ordeal had left Will surprisingly cold.

Will took his courage from Mike's breaths on his face and reached a tentative hand up to rest against the back of Mike's neck, just enough to keep him in place, and to feel the realness, the flesh-and-blood-ness, of him.

"You scared me," Mike whispered after another moment had passed.

"I'm sorry." It felt like the only thing he could say.

"Don't be sorry." He inhaled as though he was going to say something more but didn't. Then changed his mind and did. "Are they always that bad?"

"No. I haven't had one that bad in years. Probably not since high school."

This seemed to take him aback. "You were having panic attacks in high school?"

"Yeah, they started a year or two after the, uh, Mind Flayer... thing. They got worse after the War."

Mike straightened up enough to look at him properly and Will mourned the loss of his body's protective shield. "Why didn't you say anything?"

Will shrugged, an awkward thing to do against someone's thighs. "Would it have changed anything?"

"I don't know. Maybe." His brow creased. "I knew that you were having a hard time with... everything. More than the rest of us. But I guess I just never thought you were suffering that much. I could've... Helped? I don't know. I would've tried to at least."

"Maybe that's why I didn't tell anybody. I didn't want anyone's pity."

"I wouldn't have been pity." But the look in his eyes was full of it. He seemed to debate what he wanted to say before he let himself say it.

“Do you want to talk about it now?”

Will shrugged again. “Not really.”

“Can I ask what brought it on?” When Will didn’t say anything he supplied, “Was it what Nancy said?”

Shrug.

“Do you think I’m not serious about this? That I’m just fucking around?”

Shrug.

“You think I’m gonna get tired of you and leave you?”

Shrug.

“Fuck you.”

That was startling enough to make Will flinch. He looked up at Mike in shock. But Mike didn’t look angry or sad or anything one would think might accompany a ‘fuck you’. He looked so horribly, horribly fond that it was heartbreaking.

“I’m not going anywhere.”

Will’s hand moved on its own to cover Mike’s, their fingers lacing together.

“I want to be here to catch you every time you fall.”

Will chuckled wetly. “That’s the cheesiest thing anyone’s ever said to me.” It also sounded awfully familiar.

Mike smiled. “You make me stupid.”

“You’re not gonna get tired of me?”

“Not in a million million years. Will, I’ve known you since I was five years old. If I was going to get tired of you, I would’ve done it in the sixth grade.”

“Or Junior year of high school.”

“Will,” Mike groaned, pained in a way Will hadn’t meant to make him. “I would take it all back in a second if I could. You know that. Please tell me you know that.”

“I know. I’m sorry. I didn’t... Mike.”

Mike looked at him, anticipating.

Will took a breath. “What’s your favorite recurring dream?”

Mike laughed, the sound breathy and surprised. He shook his head in confusion but answered anyway. “You know what it is. It’s getting locked in the grocery store and staying up all night eating junk food and playing with everything.”

Will released air that had been trapped in his lungs for four years. “Thank you.”

Mike’s confusion deepened. “What for?”

“Everything. Catching me when I fell, I don’t know. Just. Everything.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Just, tired.”

“Do you want me to take you home?”

“No. Not yet. Can we just...? I don’t know.”

“Do you want to watch a movie?”

That sounded suddenly appealing. “Sure.”

Mike’s face split into a grin. “Cool. I’ll make some popcorn.”

Will was more tired than he’d thought. Before the title sequence of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* was even finished he’d fallen asleep and didn’t

wake up again until the Well of Souls. He was sprawled across Mike's lap again, though he was short enough that thankfully his feet weren't dangling off the edge of the old, beat-up couch.

They were down in Mike's wonderful basement, every poster and haphazardly discarded toy etched in countless memories. Mike had put a shitty TV down here some time in the mid-80's. It was still hooked up to an ancient Atari 5200 with a *Robotron: 2084* cartridge sitting in it gathering dust.

Will rolled over and picked up the half empty bowl of popcorn from the floor, resting it on his tummy and eating messy handfuls of it without bothering to sit up. He was enjoying lying on Mike too much. He was also enjoying the way Mike was absently carding through his hair again, and was surprised to find that he didn't mind in the slightest that he was messing it up. He felt more refreshed than he had this morning, and that had been on a full night's sleep.

The credits rolled and the popcorn was finished but they didn't move. Will couldn't think of anywhere he'd rather be than right here, in Mike's lap, in Mike's basement, with Mike's hand in his hair. Sex was good - amazing, mind bending, earth shattering - but this was something else altogether. This was something he hadn't even fantasized about. This was dating.

"What're you thinking about?" Mike asked.

"That I missed your basement," Will lied, not entirely sure why.

"I missed you in my basement."

Will shifted until he was looking up at him. "What else did you miss?"

Mike tilted his head, expression dreamy and far away. "Your smile."

"Mmm. What else?"

"Your smell."

Will wrinkled his nose and snorted. "My smell? What do I smell like?"



"I don't know, minty, kind of. And a little like the outdoors, like leaves and stuff. Maybe it's your aftershave."

"I don't use aftershave. I shave like once every two weeks, man."

Mike chuckled and ran his knuckles over Will's cheek. "Smooth," he observed.

"I like the way you smell, too."

"Oh? And what do I smell like?"

"Mmm..." Will hummed thoughtfully then turned his head into Mike's stomach, which was shirt clad once more, and took a noisy, dramatic whiff which made Mike laugh. "Sweat." Mike laughed again and punched him lightly in the gut. Will giggled in an unmanly way, hooking his fingers into the fabric of Mike's henley. "And grass. Summer grass, the kind that's fresh cut and damp and warm from the sun. The kind that you roll around in on a hot day in your swim trunks under a sprinkler. Yeah." He took another, more real smell of him, savoring it and relishing the way he smelled just as he had when they'd kissed for the first time. "Like summer."

Mike leaned down and kissed him then. His lips tasted of salt and butter. "I've missed you so much," he said into Will's mouth.

Will sunk his hands into Mike's molasses thick hair to stop him from pulling away. "You'll really catch me every time I fall?"

"Every single time."

He kissed him again. And again. And then there weren't any breaks between them. They kissed until they ran out of air and still they kept kissing. Mike's tongue lapped against his, lazy at first and then needy. They shifted on the couch until Mike was on top of him, his weight crushing and comforting against him, their chests together and legs tangled. They kissed and kissed and kissed. The skin around Will's mouth was chaffing from Mike's stubble but he welcomed it, just like he welcomed every single thing about him.

Gone was the frantic passion from earlier, replaced by a soft, languid exploration of each other's mouths and, when their shirts and pants

were shed, each other's bodies. Mike traced the lines of Will's ribs with his tongue. Will put his mouth to every freckle and mole across Mike's back. They touched secret, sensitive places on each other, not for pleasure but for the sheer joy of being allowed to touch. Mike scrubbed his hand over the hair on Will's leg to watch it stand on end. Will bit Mike's elbow to watch him laugh.

They rubbed against each other like cats. They breathed each other. They worked each other up slowly until they were both breathless and hypersensitized, every caress magnified and every stroke an overdose of sensation.

Will grazed his teeth over Mike's kiss-swollen bottom lip and he groaned. Will wrapped his legs around his waist and found that his heart could still seize with nerves and anticipation. He remembered his earlier desire, the need to be filled, to have the darkness chased away. He wanted Mike inside him now, but not because of that. He already felt purged of darkness. Mike had done that with just words and touches and promises that felt anything but empty. He already felt full. Full to bursting with the utter joy of being with him, of loving him and knowing that he loved him too, even if he hadn't said it. He knew Mike well enough not to mistake that tender look in his eyes for anything but. No, he wanted Mike inside him because he wanted to make love, because he wanted the boundaries between their bodies to disappear, because he wanted to give Mike everything he had and more still. Because this is what it meant to surrender yourself willingly to another human being.

"Do you have a condom?" Will breathed into Mike's ear.

"What - I - yeah," Mike answered, surprised, as if he hadn't realized where they were headed until they'd arrived. "Yeah. Just a sec."

Will watched him as he stalked naked to a dresser half buried under memorabilia, enjoying the view afforded him of the smooth, ceramic curves of his ass. It felt a little silly to suggest a condom, but they'd both had other partners and the AIDS scare was still all too prevalent. Will always preferred to air on the side of caution when it came to things like this. He'd seen too many marches and attended one funeral too many not to be scared of something so deadly.

Mike returned with a silver package and bottle of hand lotion in hand. Will didn't know if he should laugh or be asking why Mike had condoms stashed away in his basement. He went to lie back down on top of him but Will surprised them both by flipping their positions so he ended up straddling Mike's lap. Mike grinned dopily up at him, not complaining about the shift.

Will took the wrapper from him and ripped it open with his teeth, then proceeded to roll the condom down Mike's length. Mike hissed at the touch and rubbed a hand over Will's chest, exploring and just enjoying the feel of him. When he was done, Will took the lotion and pumped a generous amount onto his hand, reaching between his legs to slather himself and then the already lubricated condom.

He was kneeling over Mike, head bowed to watch himself position Mike's cock at his entrance, when Mike grabbed him by the wrist.

Will looked up questioningly and was then taken aback by the sight of Mike under him, flushed again, chest already heaving, pupils blown. But there was a hint of something in his face, something Will couldn't place.

"Okay?" Will asked.

"Yeah, I just..." He bit his lip, trying to find the words amid the fog of arousal. Finally he said, "I've waited four years for this."

Will leaned down and pressed a chaste kiss to the corner of his mouth. "Me too."

He sank down on Mike's cock and the pressure was so tremendous that for a moment he didn't think he'd be able to fit inside him. He hadn't prepared himself well enough and it had been too long since he'd been with someone. He forced himself to relax, loosen muscles that screamed at him to clench. He dug his fingers into the back of the couch until his knuckles whitened, teeth clasped painfully together.

"Hey, hey, hey," Mike soothed, hands rubbing up and down Will's thighs. "It's okay. We can change positions, or, we don't have to, we can just-"

"No, it's fine," Will got out through his teeth. "It's fine."

"Are you sure? I don't mind, I promise I don't-"

"Just shut up." To soften the words he bent over and kissed him again. The slight shift of his body helped and the head of Mike's cock was able to push past the first tight ring of muscle. The feeling of invasion and pressure was still just this side of bearable, but the worst was over and Will was able to finally let out the breath he'd been holding.

Mike gasped at the feeling, eyes falling shut and hands stalling on Will's legs. Will let himself sink farther, letting gravity do most of the work, trying not to focus on the almost too painful burn of Mike stretching him impossibly wide. He didn't stop until their hips were flush, Mike buried entirely inside of him.

Mike was barely breathing, just short little breaths puffing out of him. His fingers trembled where they gripped Will's thighs.

"Okay?" Will asked again, a hand snaking around his own shaft to pump himself back to full hardness.

"Mmmfff-fuuuuuck," Mike groaned. "Fuck, you're so - so tight." He swallowed thickly, Adam's apple bobbing. "Jesus, Will."

Will whimpered at the way Mike moaned his name. He could hear it again and again and again for the rest of his life and never tire of it.

Slowly, so agonizingly slowly, he began to rock his hips. Not pulling off of him, just moving against him, letting himself adjust, letting himself find the right spot. When he leaned forward he suddenly brought the head of Mike's cock against his prostate and his consciousness briefly fuzzed out like bad reception on a TV. He let go of himself because he knew that if he kept stroking he'd come in a matter of seconds.

Instead, he gripped Mike's shoulders and used them for leverage to push himself as far off of him as he could without losing him altogether and then sunk down, hard and fast and hitting that absolute amazing place inside him. They both cried out, backs

arching in tandem.

“God Jesus fuck,” Mike swore in one breath. “Will - fuck - do that again - please - God - please-”

He hadn't finished that second please before Will had liften off and back down again. Then again. Faster each time. With every pass the stretch and pressure became not only bearable but incredible, the scrape of Mike's cock entering and leaving him something that made stars explode across his vision and made heat pool into every crevice of his body. Every graze against his prostate was explosions and sparks and fire catching. He was crying and keening and whimpering and making all other sorts of noises he hadn't know he was capable of.

Mike's hips were lifting off the couch to meet his own, thrusting up into him, fucking him, like so many fantasies and yet like nothing Will could ever have imagined. Mike was bouncing him on his lap, rattling Will's insides, their bodies making wet, slapping noises where they met, sounds that echoed off the basement walls and back at them.

“Fuck - fuck -” Mike was moaning, gasping, breathless from exertion. “Oh fuck - Will - shit - I'm not - fuck - I'm gonna come -”

“Hahh- mmfuck - not yet -” Will whined, head thrown back and back bowed. Sweat dripped from his hairline and into his eyes, ran down between his shoulders. His legs were cramping from the effort of keeping him moving, abdomen trembling. “Fuck - Mike - ahhh haaah - don't stop - don't stop - don't stop don't stopdon'tstop -”

“God - baby-” Mike grunted, driving into him with a force that left Will's ass raw. “Yes - shit - yes - you're so fuck- so fucking good -” He treacherously fisted Will's cock and jerked him with hard, unrelenting strokes that left Will dizzy.

“Nn-no, shit - Mike - I-” Will sobbed, feeling his climax speeding up into him and not wanting it to be over, wanting it to never, ever end. “Oh God - Mike - aaah - haah - fuck - Mike -!”

His orgasm shot from Mike's fist with a force that was staggering, hot

strings of come painting Mike's chest. It felt like his insides were being ripped from him. It barrelled through him, it wrecked him, it exploded inside him. Every nerve ending in his body lit up. He felt it all the way to his toes. He felt it in his soul. It left him feeling ruined and hollowed out. It left him blind and dumb. It left his ears ringing. He felt as if he were coming for years, centuries, infinity, infinity times infinity. He came until he forgot what his body was, until he forgot his own name. And then it was over.

When he came to he found himself horizontal, his cheek pressed against Mike's sweaty shoulder, his entire body rising and falling with Mike's heaving chest. He felt the stickiness under his stomach and realized he was lying in his own come but he found he didn't have the strength to move. He also found, when he went to stretch his legs, that Mike was still inside him.

"Did you come?" He asked, sounding dazed.

Mike laughed, something that Will could feel reverberate through both their chests. " Yes . Jesus, you really go to another place when you orgasm."

"It's a talent," he said, because he knew it would make him laugh. It did. But really he wanted to say *Only with you* .

Mike was stroking his sweat slick back in great sweeps. "God, that was..."

"Incredible," Will supplied.

"More than that. That was a religious experience. I don't know if it's because I want you so much or what but I don't think I've ever, *ever* felt like that."

Will was going to quip something witty, but instead said, in an honest moment of vulnerability, "Me neither."

"You're the... sexiest, most amazing thing that's ever existed."

Will wrinkled his nose. "I'm not sexy. Cute, maybe."

"Shut up." Mike kissed the side of his head. "You're so sexy it freaks

me out.”

“That’s just weird.”

“No, no, it’s like... I look at you and I can’t believe you’d want to be with me. I can’t believe you *chose* to do this with me. Me!”

“Me!” Will mimicked and laughed as he bit down on Mike’s shoulder.

“Ow! You little shit!” But Mike was laughing too.

Will kissed the spot he’d just bitten by way of apology. “I seriously can’t believe you think that. You’re... you. Mike Wheeler, Hawkins’ sweetheart. You’re like a broody French model.”

“Shut up,” Mike snorted.

“I mean it! Ask anyone we went to school with - girls *and* boys - and they’ll tell you that Darren Tromblay might’ve won prom king but you were the one everyone wanted to sleep with.”

“What!” Mike balked, incredulous. “No - what? Who said that?”

“ *Everybody* !”

“Bullshit. You’re making that up.”

“Why would I make that up?”

“Because you don’t know how to take a compliment.”

“I can take a compliment! And I’m not making it up! Ask El! She’ll tell you- shit.” Will sat up suddenly and then almost instantly regretted it when Mike slipped fully out of him and his backside ached like he’d been spanked repeatedly with a lead paddle.

Mike angled up on his elbows, all traces of humor wiped away by concern. “What? What’s wrong?”

“What time is it?”

Mike twisted his arm to glimpse the face of his watch. “Five-ish.”

“ *Shit* !” Will swore again, scrambling to his feet and searching frantically for his clothes. “I needed to get peas!”

“ *What* ?”

“Peas! For Christmas dinner!”

“Oh shit,” Mike blanched, scrambling himself to get up and clothed. “Christmas Eve’s *tonight* . My parents are gonna be back any second.”

Will pitched sideways into a wall as he lost his balance trying to jump into his jeans. Mike giggled at him even as he tripped over his own feet getting his socks on. Will marveled at how easy it was to disrobe compared to getting dressed. He ended up with his sweater on backwards and inside out. Mike’s hair looked as though it had been through a wind tunnel. There was no disguising the fact that they both looked, accurately, as though they’d just had sex.

Will pointed a finger in the general direction of all of Mike and started laughing. He laughed until he was red in the face and he got a stitch in his side, doubled over with hands on his knees. Mike laughed with him. Will felt giddy, high. The world was brighter, more vibrant. There were no shadows to be found. He was so deliciously happy he could’ve died.

Their laughter was still in the petering out giggle stage when Mike wrapped his long arms around Will’s body. Will could feel both their laughs in their chests. He tucked his head under Mike’s chin, letting that same feeling of protection wash over him. Safe and warm and complete. He wanted to live in those arms, breathe Mike’s air, swallow his saliva. He wanted to dissolve and seep through Mike’s pores. He wanted every boundary between them to disappear and be two parts of the same whole. He wanted to stay here forever.

“I don’t want you to go,” Mike said into his hair, laughter a distant echo in the walls.

“I don’t want to go either,” Will said, but no sooner had the words left his mouth than he realized he had to go. He didn’t just have to leave the house, he had to leave Hawkins. He had to return to New York in three days. And Mike had to return to Chicago, he didn’t



know when but soon probably. He'd let himself merge with another human being only to be ripped summarily apart, the scab over the wound being torn off and leaving behind a jagged hole. He had to go. *Mike* had to go.

What would happen when they parted? What would happen when he was back in his Brooklyn apartment and Mike was back in Chicago? Would they call each other? Meet every few months somewhere between the two states? Would Will fly out to Illinois for spring break and Mike fly out to New York for the summer? What would happen in those spans in between? How would he go to sleep at night, every night, without Mike beside him? How would he be able to stand the thought of Mike living a thousand miles away, being ogled by boys and girls, and who knew if in a moment of weakness, in a moment of loneliness, of missing Will, he didn't succumb to their advances, if only to fill the Will shaped hole inside him? What then? Would Mike call him, tearfully, and in an act of bravery and selfishness confess it all, begging for Will's forgiveness? What then?

Will's heart was barely tethered together as it was. His fragile sanity was constantly on the brink of self destruction. The thought of the person he'd spent years pining for, years of desperation desiring, and who was finally in his grasp only to turn around and crush his heart under heel made bile rise up in the back of his throat. It had been so much easier when heartbreak was the norm, when he'd become inured to the constant pain. But being with Mike these past two days had healed the years of pain and he finally - *finally!* - knew what it was to be whole. To have that and then have it taken away from him? To know what he could have had and not be able to? He wouldn't be able to survive that. He had barely survived it at sixteen, when there was so little to lose. Now that he had everything to lose...

"Hey," Mike's voice came to him from across years and oceans. "You're doing it again. What's wrong?"

Will shrugged under his arms, his own fingers fiddling manically with a loose thread at the hem of his sweater. "Nothing," he mumbled into Mike's chest.

A sigh ruffled Will's hair. "Please don't do that. We said we were gonna be honest with each other. I can't help you if you don't talk to

me.”

“Maybe I don’t want help.”

“Because that worked so well in the past.”

Will jerked back out of Mike’s arms, his warmth, to glare up at him.  
“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You didn’t tell anyone about your panic attacks and they got worse. You never told me how you felt and it made you miserable. How many times are you going to make the same mistake before you figure out that there’s people who want to help you and, maybe, they can actually help?”

“I told people about my panic attacks, Mike, I just didn’t tell you.”

That brought him up short. “What?”

“And I told people how I felt about you. I’ve been letting people help me since I was dragged out of the Upside Down. It’s just you, *your* help that I don’t want.”

Mike’s mouth opened and closed several times. “Bu- why?”

“Because I can’t need you! What am I going to do when you’re not around anymore? What am I supposed to do when you leave?”

Mike reached out a hand to touch Will’s face. “I told you, I’m not going anywhere-”

“Yes, you are!” Will shied away from him. “You *live* in *Chicago* !”

“Is that what this is about?”

Will leveled him with a withering look.

“Will, baby.” Mike stepped forward and grabbed his face before he had a chance to escape. “Can we please just cross that bridge when we get to it? Please? I don’t want to fight. I just want to be with you. Just us. For as long as we have. Okay? Just us.” He brought Will back against his chest, whispering into his hair, “Just us...”

Will let the fight drain out of him, sagging against Mike's body. "I don't want you to go," he mumbled.

"I don't want you to go," Mike echoed and agreed.

Will hugged him back.

They shared a kiss that was decidedly more sober than any of their previous kisses.

And then Will left.

## 8. Part VIII: Leap of Faith

### Notes for the Chapter:

Sorry for the late chapter! I've come down with the plague \*cough\*cough\* Hang on to your butts because a lot happens in this chapter. Most everybody's been suspicious or curious about what's going on in Mike's head, so surprise! Get ready to swing between tenses /and/ POVs!

## Part VIII: Leap of Faith

*Tick tick tick .*

That's the sound of the clock in the living room. Mike can hear it clearly from the dining room, loud enough to be a guest at the table. Its presence certainly feels like the only welcome one.

No one at the Wheeler's Christmas Eve supper seems inclined to look each other in the eye. Holly, the same age Mike was when his world was first turned upside down, is as disinterested in her family as Mike had been. Nancy is still holding a grudge because of their earlier argument - though honestly Mike should be far more upset than her, seeing as she nearly ruined the fragile, budding romance between himself and Will. And his parents have long since stopped speaking to each other in civil tones, preferring silence over the vitriol they were likely to begin shouting at each other should they get started. Additionally, Mike has not had anything in common with his family since he was ten years old, which is probably when they stopped having anything in common with each other.

"Can you pass the broccoli, please, Nancy?" Mom says, politely mincing her ham into smaller and smaller portions. It's the first thing that's been spoken at the table in six minutes. Mike's been counting.

They're having broccoli because Will had absconded with their bag of frozen peas. The rest of the meal had been prepared ahead of time and stored in the fridge, easily reheatable for when his mom, dad,

and Holly returned from Indianapolis.

Peas are passed. Peas are ladled onto a plate. Peas are eaten.

*Tick tick tick .*

“So,” Dad says, his voice startling everyone to flinch. “How’s school?”

Mike looks at Holly. She rolls her eyes in the most “duh” way he’s ever seen. Must be a Mike question then. Mike tugs at his tie, stalling. “Um. Fine.”

“Good,” Dad says, chewing contemplatively on a slab of ham. Mom darts him a glare that suggests she would like very much to stab him in the eye with her fork. “That’s good.”

Not to be outdone, Mom asks, “How are you enjoying your classes?”

“They’re fine.”

Silence.

*Tick tick tick .*

“Did you know that Holly has just started class with your favorite teacher this year?”

Mike looks at Nancy. Nancy gestures with her eyebrows in Mom’s direction. Still a Mike question, then.

He wracks his brain trying to recall a favorite teacher. His mind has gone distressingly blank. “Who?”

“Mr. Clarke, silly,” Mom says, as though it’s obvious. And, then, it is. Of course. Mr. Clarke. God, that brings back memories.

“Oh. Really?” He turns to Holly expectantly.

She just stares at him from under her too-long bangs.

“Yes,” Mom answers for her after a beat. “Biology. He says she shows a lot of promise. Which isn’t surprising.” Mom passes a loving hand over Holly’s cheek which Holly jerks away from as if brushed by an

alligator's tail.

"That's great." Does he sound as unenthused as he thinks he sounds? Probably. Just as likely is that no one gives a shit.

Silence settles over them yet again. Stifling as the heat inside the house and under his buttoned collar and throttling tie.

Mike is starting to see the appeal of stabbing someone with a fork. Maybe himself. Is suicide by fork a valid option?

He feels instantly guilty for joking, even internally, about suicide, when Will just yesterday (was it only yesterday?) had confessed to his own attempted suicide. When he'd told him, Mike had been floored, as if the idea of Will taking his own life had never occurred to him. Now, though, the thought of Will lying lifeless, having swallowed a bottle of pills or slashed his wrists, makes his world tip sideways and his airways close up. When Will had his panic attack earlier, when he'd fainted and gone limp in his arms, Mike had never been so afraid in all his life. All he could think was *please don't leave, please don't leave me. Not now that I have you. Please.*

He's still processing the fact that Will didn't trust him with something like that, even back when they'd still been best friends. He doesn't understand Will's explanation, about not wanting to need him because if he left it meant he wouldn't be able to cope. Will's mind travels in strange circles that Mike has never been quite able to grasp. He's always been so much smarter than him. Or, not smarter, but deeper maybe. More in touch with himself and his emotions. Which is probably why what happened to them affected Will more than it did him. Mike just isn't as sensitive. Then again, the kinds of things that happened to Will... Mike only has an inkling of what that could've been like.

He's been to the Upside Down, he's fought Demo-dogs and Demogorgons and Nothics, and he helped bring an end to the Mind Flayer once and for all during the War to End All Wars, but he didn't have to hide, alone and afraid and unarmed, in the Upside Down while a Demogorgon stalked him. He didn't have his mind and body eviscerated by the Mind Flayer. He wasn't possessed and forced to endanger the people he loves most. He's never had a Demogorgon

slug living inside of him. Maybe even he, Mike Wheeler, would've lost his grip on reality if all of that had happened to him.

It's really terrifying, in a way, because he is completely overwhelmed by Will's level of damage and has no idea how to help him, or if he should even try to help him. It's an odd suffering in itself to watch someone you love suffer. And he does love him. He hasn't stopped loving him since they were boys. He hasn't stopped loving him since the first time they kissed and his brain had exploded. If he'd thought the Nether had turned his life upside down, that was nothing compared to realizing he was, is, in love with Will Byers.

He hates that he's here now, dying from the tedium, drowning in the tension, instead of buried inside of Will. He shouldn't be pushing mashed potatoes around his plate, he should be gliding his hands over Will's flawless skin. He shouldn't be making polite conversation with people he can barely stand, he should be listening to Will's laugh, should be kissing the beckoning twin moles on the elegant column of his throat, should be talking about how much they've missed each other and all the things they love about each other now. He wants to lose himself in Will without a map. He wants to take him to bed and not leave for days. He wants-

*"Mike!"*

Mike starts, looking round. Everyone is staring at him. He assumes they've been trying to get his attention for a while.

"Um - huh?" He stammers, going suddenly red in the face. "What's, um, what's up?"

"The salt," Dad prompts, unphased, gesturing with his knife.

"Yeah," Mike answers before he's even made sense of what his dad said. "Yeah. 'Course."

He reaches for the salt shaker in front of him and just as quickly drops it, creating a tiny salt avalanche on the tablecloth.

Mom makes likes she's going to spring out of her chair so Mike hastily scoops up the spilled grains, just collecting them in his palm

with no clear plan of what to do next. That's sort of a metaphor for his life in general, he thinks bitterly.

"Sorry, I'm sorry," he mutters.

"Are you okay, honey?" Mom asks. "You've been distracted all night."

Mike finally settles on uncapping the salt shaker and getting as much lost salt back into it as he can manage. His father sits there, looking extremely put upon that his salt is further delayed.

"I'm just tired," Mike offers by way of excuse. Then he forces himself to yawn dramatically to drive the point home. Nancy might've been in the drama club, but he can play-act with the best of them. "I think I'm still kinda wasted from the trip. I actually think I'm gonna turn in early."

"Now?" Mom stresses when he pushes his plate away.

"Yeah, I'm just..." He takes a cue from Will and shrugs.

"Well... Okay."

He can feel Nancy glaring a hole in the side of his head but he doesn't give her the satisfaction of acknowledging her. He knows what she's thinking. Why should he get to escape when the rest of them have to suffer through this hell?

"I'll, um, see you in the morning. Okay?" He's already on his feet before the words have finished leaving his mouth.

"Alright. But don't forget we're opening presents in the morning."

"Yeah. Of course." Before he makes it to the stairs he adds, "Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas, Mike," his mother says, sounding suddenly very tired herself.

"Merry Christmas, kiddo," his father says, sounding as distant as the moon.



Mike takes the stairs two at a time, a half-formed plan already coalescing in his mind.

---

Will wished he could appreciate the noise. Christmas Eve dinners had always been quiet affairs in the Byers' household, just him and Jonathan and their mom. He still thought of them fondly, those quiet nights. But it was something altogether more gratifying to sit at a Christmas dinner with a table so full of people and life and conversation and laughter that everyone had to raise their voices to be heard. Elbows knocked into each other, silverware clattered regularly to the floor, wine was spilled, food was flung, water was choked on. Will wanted to savor it all, but he couldn't.

He couldn't because he had promised Darius, Jonathan, El, and, most importantly, himself that he would come out to his mom and stepdad before Christmas. This was the whole reason for his return to Hawkins. He couldn't stomach the thought of returning to New York a coward, someone who'd had every opportunity to do the right thing but hadn't taken it. Then again, thinking about returning to New York was still filling him with all sorts of dread that had nothing and everything to do with coming out. He was resigned to try, if only for tonight, to put leaving Hawkins and leaving Mike out of his mind. It was hard enough to focus on the task at hand when every time he shifted in his seat a spike of pain shot through him, reminding him what he and Mike had spent the afternoon doing.

Zoey, an impish, voluptuous blonde with the kind of thick framed glasses seen on school teachers and British movie stars, was regaling those nearest to her with a story about her trip to Czechoslovakia. El was having a profound discussion with Darius about *All My Children*. Every few minutes Mom would ask Hopper if he agreed, in a way that didn't give him a chance to disagree. Will was staring at the untouched, lovingly if ill-prepared food on his plate, hands balled into white knuckled fists on his lap under the table to keep them from shaking. *Now or never*, he told himself. *Now. Now now now now NOW NOW-*

“-there wasn't a clean surface in the whole hostile-”

“-but if Billy didn’t die, then who was in the casket when they-”

“-that’s amazing! Isn’t it amazing, Hop?”

“-Mom, you should hear about that time she was locked out of the bathroom in the-”

“-Jonathan, you know I hate that story!”

“Come on, it’ll be fun-”

“I’M GAY!”

All conversation around the table stopped, a silence descending upon them similar to the one that proceeds a bomb detonating. There was a low grade whining noise in Will’s ears, broken only by the clinking of a fork against a plate as it was set down. He could feel every pair of eyes at the table on him and could feel the blood surging under the thin skin of cheeks. He wanted a chasm to open up in the earth beneath him and swallow him up. He wished they hadn’t slaughtered every Demogorgon because at the moment he very much wanted to be eaten by one. *Bob was the lucky one*, he thought, then immediately regretted it. Just because he was miserable didn’t mean he had a right to be vicious.

He couldn’t bring himself to meet his family’s eyes.

Exactly how much longer was this silence going to last? Will didn’t think his heart would be able to take much more of this.

Then finally, *finally*, he heard Hopper’s deep, grumbling voice say, “Okay.” A pause, and then, “Jane, can you hand me that wine bottle?”

“Sure,” El answered, uncharacteristically obsequious.

Will’s head snapped up and he stared at Hopper, mouth agape, as he so casually accepted the wine from El and topped off his glass, then Mom’s.

“Okay?” Will echoed dumbly. “*Okay ? That... that’s it? Just... okay ?*”

Hopper put down his knife and fork for a moment, leveling his steely, cop gaze on Will. "Is it not okay?"

"I..." Will forced himself to shut his mouth lest a fly land in it. "I mean, yeah, yes. Of course it's okay. I just, shouldn't we... talk about it?"

"Okay," Hopper said, sounding exasperated already. "What would you like to talk about?"

"I don't know!" Will threw up his hands, exasperated himself, all his nerves turning into anger without warning. All of his emotions were too raw, too on the surface. It was possible he had chosen the worst time to come out. "Don't you have any questions? Your step-son-" and to his mom he added "-your *son* has just told you he's gay. Aren't you even a little bit concerned or surprised or curious? Even a little?"

"Do you want us to ask you questions?" Hopper said in a way that made Will's concerns sound ludicrous.

That only further stoked his irrational anger. Will tried to ignore the waves of discomfort radiating off the rest of the table's occupants. "Maybe! Maybe I just want my parents to care, even a little, that their son has just revealed the single biggest secret one person can have!"

"Well," Mom started, scrunching her nose (a gesture Will had inherited). "Sweetie, it's not like we didn't already know."

Leave it to the most dramatic person in the room to say something as mind-blowing as that little sentence as if it were the most natural thing in the world. She might as well have said *Cold outside, isn't it?*

Will felt as though he'd been slapped. His brain was having difficulty making sense of his mother's words. "You..." His voice, which just seconds ago had been raised in outrage, was barely louder than a whisper now. "You what?"

Hopper shot Mom a side look which suggested they'd agreed not to mention this. Mom replied with a shrug and an exaggerated widening of her eyes.

An awful sensation was settling in the pit of Will's stomach. The slimy putrescence of dread. "How long?"

Hopper and his mom exchanged glances. "How long what, sweetie?"

"How long have you *known*?"

Mom paused, clearly aware that her next words were going to be upsetting. "Since Donald Melvald saw you kissing Billy Hargrove behind the pharmacy."

Another slap. These world-shattering revelations really needed to stop. Or to stop happening in such quick succession. If not he was going to die of a heart attack before he reached the age of twenty-one. "*Three years*?" He screeched, and there wasn't a single person at the table who didn't wince. "You've known for three fucking years and you didn't say *anything*?"

"Hey, hey, hey," Hopper admonished, brandishing a fork. "Watch the language around your mother."

"Did you know?" Will demanded, turning to El. "Did you know they knew?"

El at least had the decency to look guilty.

"I can't believe this." Will's shock had given way back to anger, his emotions struggling to catch up to the conversational rollercoaster. "I can't believe you let me... Do you know how horrible this has been for me? Do you have any idea how long I suffered trying to find the courage to tell you? And you just *let me*... Oh my God." Will dragged his hands over his face. "You let me agonize over this for *years*, and you knew the whole fucking time."

"Well, we've known about, about you being... *gay*," Mom said the word as if she wasn't sure he was allowed to use it. "But we don't know anything else. All the other moms, you know, the ones with uh, uh, straight sons, they know all about their sons' first loves, their girlfriends, but we don't know any of that, and, sweetie, I've always wanted you to be able to - I mean, I've always wanted you to feel that you *could* tell me about that part of your life."

"I-" Will stopped himself, anger catching. Everyone was watching him expectantly, most of them anticipating another outburst. He caught his brother's eye, his face no less anxious than the rest, but then his gaze traveled to where Jonathan's hand was linked with Zoey's on the tabletop. Will turned back to his mom, startled to find his vision hazy from a sudden onset of welling tears. "You really want to know?"

Mom seemed to melt all at once. "Of *course* I do, sweetheart. We both do. Don't we, Hop?"

Hop was already tucking back into his turkey. He gave a noncommittal grunt which would have been insulting if it weren't his reply to pretty much everything.

"So we know about Billy," Mom began, clearly steering Will towards the conversation whether he was ready or not. "And Darius. How long have you two been together?"

"Oh, we're not-" both Will and Darius began at the same time, then laughed.

Mom joined in, laughing at herself just as much, not a hint of unease about her. "I'm sorry! I just, you know, assumed. Usually when your gay son brings home their 'roommate' it's because..."

Will found himself laughing, genuinely laughing, and could feel the tension bleeding out of the room along with it. "Oh my God, Mom. Please stop saying 'gay'. It sounds so weird when you say it."

"What! I'm - I'm *hip* . I'm groovy."

Jonathan and Will groaned simultaneously, "Do not *ever* say 'groovy', Mom," Jonathan laughed.

"Okay, okay. So you and Darius aren't... together. But Billy Hargrove, huh?"

Will blushed despite himself. "Yeah. I guess. We were together for a bit. I can't believe Mr. Melvald saw that." Will covered his eyes with his hand. "That is just..." And then he burst out laughing again. "We thought we were being so careful! Does this mean the whole town

knows?”

No one quite wanted to answer that, even if the imminent danger of Will exploding all over them had passed. Their silence was answer enough.

“I guess I should be grateful,” Will said, still smiling, “They all know but no one refused to serve me or anything, so that’s a good sign.”

“Did you know that Darren Tromblay came out a few years ago?”

“No! Really? Darren Tromblay? Prom king Darren Tromblay?”

“Oh yeah. He works at the garage down on Main Street now. Everyone’s been so supportive. Hawkins really is such a special place.”

“Yeah,” Will said, a dreamy smile tugging at the corner of his lips. “It is.”

“Anyway! You were telling us about your first love!”

Will chuckled. “I don’t know if Billy was my first love. We connected, being the only two gay kids around that we knew of. But it didn’t really go anywhere. We stayed friends for a long time. I still write to him every now and then.”

“Why don’t you tell her about Greg?” This was Darius, being helpful.

Will shot him a playfully murderous glare, then resumed. “So, my first real boyfriend was in Freshman year of college.”

His mother was watching him with rapt attention, her food forgotten. Even Hopper’s ears had perked, though he was trying his best to seem as disinterested as usual. Will had a fierce love for them in that moment. Because they loved him and accepted him no matter what. Because they’d known for years and hadn’t treated him any differently. Because they honestly cared about who he loved and wanted to know, not just as perfunctory knowledge, but because they wanted to share his experiences with him. He was so lucky, he realized. He was also very stupid. For ever having been angry at them, for having panicked so much about coming out, for not trusting

that they loved him enough not to let this change how they felt about him. He was going to have to spend some time reevaluating the way people around him loved him.

“We met after our first class, Introduction to Figure Drawing,” he continued with his story. “He came up to me after and told me how he’d been looking at me during class and wanted to see if I’d go out for a drink with him. Of course I told him I wasn’t old enough to drink but he...”

---

Mike paces the length of his childhood bedroom, running and rerunning through his plan in his mind. He just wants to see Will so badly. He can be forgiven for certain lapses in judgement where Will Byers is concerned. Can't he? Isn't Will the whole reason for this?

He stops in the middle of his room, eyeing the poorly wrapped package sitting innocently atop his dresser. It doesn't even know what kind of torment it's put him through over the past few months, taunting him at every opportunity. It'll be a relief to finally be rid of it, presented to Will like his own heart on a platter. *Take it, do with it what you will. I'd rather you hurt me than do nothing to me at all.*

He can still feel the phantom sensations of Will's body on top of his - his thighs are certainly bruised enough to recall them - and the press of his chapped lips and the way he dug his fingers into his shoulders. Even through the ham and broccoli and mashed potatoes he thinks he can still taste Will. The sweetness of his mouth, the salt of his sweat, the bitter tang of his come. If he closes his eyes and holds his breath, he can almost hear Will's heart beating, that hammering, pounding sound that Mike could feel against his chest when Will lay on him.

He doesn't want these days between them to end. Maybe that's why he's so desperate to get to him now, to not waste a single second of his time in Hawkins. If they would have to part, at least they could part without any regrets. No, that's a lie. He's going to regret so much, for the rest of his life. But he doesn't want to have to live with the regret that he never told Will how he feels. How he truly feels. Not in coded, double-meanings, but with all of his words, the words

that had failed him when he was seventeen, the words that had failed him on graduation day when he'd looked across the reception and seen Will and thought *I might never see you again* and a little part of his heart had shriveled and died.

He shrugs on his overcoat, wraps his scarf several times around his neck and lower face, pulls on his knit cap, and shoves the small box into his pocket.

He perfected his window escape technique years ago, so it's hardly any trouble to squeeze through the window, shuffle onto the gutter, crawl to the garage, then drop down the remaining seven feet to the lawn. The problem is doing all of that with cold numbed fingers. He's barely able to keep hold of the garage overhang long enough to let himself drop harmlessly.

But he does make it. He's crunching as silently as he can manage through the snow, around the side of the garage and to his car in the driveway, when something suddenly grabs his arm.

He starts violently, almost falling on his ass in the snow. The someone/something who grabbed him takes hold of his hand to steady him before he can meet this demise.

With his heart still kicking wildly behind his ribs, he squints in the low light to make out his assailant. Only to discover Nancy glowering up at him.

Mike releases her hand as if burned. "What the hell are you doing?" He hisses.

"What the hell are *you* doing?"

He doesn't reply. Plausible deniability.

Nancy just rolls her eyes. Or he assumes she does. It's hard to tell when the only light source is coming from the shuttered windows of the house. "You're going to the Byers', aren't you?"

"No," Mike denies out of habit.

"Don't be an asshole. Of course you're going to the Byers'. Here's the



deal. I won't tell on you, if... you take me with you."

Mike doesn't try to disguise his surprise. "You... want to go to the Byers'. Why?"

"Are you kidding? Look at Christmas at our place. Now imagine what it's like at the Byers'."

Mike can see her point.

"So? Are you taking me or not?"

Mike shuffles his feet in the snow, rubbing the back of his neck. "I don't know, Nance... I just..."

"I brought this." And then Nancy produces from the folds of her coat the bottle of tequila their dad bought on his business trip to Sinaloa.

Mike can't help but grin at her and jerk his thumb in the direction of his car. "Okay. Hop in."

---

The party, as they say, was in full swing.

After dinner, and Will's detailed account on the history of his dating life, Jonathan found an old *New Order* record, Hopper cracked open a bottle of Jack, and El decided to fool their houseguests with her sleight of hand card tricks (spoiler alert: she used her powers). They adjourned to the living room and everything went south, or north, from there.

Currently, Jonathan and Zoey were dancing with the Christmas tree, their drinks sloshing in their glasses, ornaments rattling and occasionally falling with a tinkle and a crack to the floor, while El continued to amaze Darius with cards and Hopper chided her, and Mom watched the whole thing from the armchair with the kind of pleasant, buzzed stupor one can only achieve through two glasses of wine and one glass of whiskey.

Will leaned against the wall, trying to contain the reeling in his head,

nursing his second glass of Jack. He was a terrible lightweight and hadn't had nearly enough to eat at dinner. He was flushed, and giggling too often for it to be normal. He was feeling wholesome and content and warm and was in love with all of them in that moment. He had never loved Christmas as much as he did right then. He had never loved his family as much as he did right then, and that included his extended family of Darius and Zoey, his adopted New York family. He wanted this night to never end.

His mother caught his eye and grinned crookedly, patting the arm of the recliner. Will staggered over, trying to keep the floor from pitching under his feet with every step. He fell heavily down upon the arm, wincing as his sore backside protested, and ended up mostly on his mother's lap, but she seemed perfectly happy with that position and wrapped a tiny arm about his waist, snuggling up against him as though he were four years old and no time at all had passed.

She blew out a vaporous stream of smoke and crushed out her cigarette in the ashtray on the other arm of the recliner. She was then free to wrap both arms around him and it was silly how good it felt to be hugged so tenderly by his mother. He rested his cheek on the top of her head and breathed in the homey scent of her, laundry and cigarettes and cedar. It took him back to every time he was sick as a child and she'd held him close and he'd felt so safe from the world.

With the rest of the party whirling around them, they were the calm in the eye of the storm, sequestered in their own private little world. They were untouchable.

"So," his mom said. "You wanna tell me about you and Mike?"

Will was too tipsy to be shocked. He just sighed and closed his eyes. "Is it that obvious?"

"Mmm," Mom answered noncommittally. Then said suddenly, "Do you want to know how I first figured out you didn't like girls? I mean, not in the same way you like, you know..."

"I know what you mean." When Will opened his eyes again the Christmas lights of the tree seemed to blur so he was living in a

world of blue, red, gold, green streaks. “Was it because you heard I kissed Billy Hargrove behind the pharmacy?”

Mom chuckled. “No. It was because I saw the way you looked at Mike.”

Will straightened enough to look at his mother. Her face was solemn, dark eyes twinkling in the festive lights.

“You were always following him around.” There was a fond smile playing on her lips. “Wouldn’t do a thing without him, ever since you were little. When he was around, you would look at him like he was every star, every birthday cake, every Christmas morning. That’s when I knew. I knew there wasn’t a girl in the world who could compare to the way you felt about him.”

Will wanted to tell her she was drunk, or that she’d imagined it all, or she’d mistaken childhood adoration for something it wasn’t. And while she might’ve been drunk, she wasn’t wrong.

Will swiped a hand over the moisture accumulating in his eyes and sniffled. “I’m scared, Mom.”

“Oh, baby.” She cupped his face in her hands. It was almost too much for him. He used every ounce of strength he possessed to keep himself from sobbing.

“I just... I love him so much. I love him too much. He’s gonna hurt me again, I know he will, he can’t not hurt me when I already hurt so much just from loving him. And when he does, I’m going to fall apart and I won’t be able to put myself back together again. Not this time.”

“Sweetheart, I want to tell you something, and I want you to listen to me. Okay?”

Will nodded within her hands. Her thumbs were rubbing away his tears before they had a chance to fall down his cheeks.

“When you love someone, you’re going to get hurt. That’s unavoidable. It’s part of what makes love *love*. What you have to do is ask yourself: would you rather protect yourself and never fall in love, or would you rather open yourself up to someone, let them in

and love them and have your heart broken but get to feel all the happiness and the - the - the *completeness* that comes with being in love with someone and having them be in love with you too?"

Will's lip trembled and he sucked in a breath, willing himself not cry more than he already was. "Mom..."

"No, don't answer now, sweetie. Just think about it." She rubbed her thumbs across his cheeks a last time and released him. He felt much colder without her hands. "Will you promise me you'll think about it?"

Will summoned a watery smile and nodded.

She smoothed over his hair in the way he hated but loved because it was so *her*. "That's my boy."

The doorbell rang.

"I'll get it!" Jonathan called, giggling as he nearly tripped over his own feet on his way to the door.

"Who could that be, at this hour?" Mom asked. Will shrugged, craning his neck to watch Jonathan yank open the front door.

From his vantage point and with Jonathan standing in the doorway, Will couldn't see who'd arrived. But after only a moment's quiet conference, Jonathan pulled the door open wide and turned to the rest of them with a big, drunken grin.

"Hey, everybody!" He announced. "Look who's here!"

Will's heart stilled when he laid eyes on Mike, all cold-flushed and windswept and handsome in his black overcoat. Will barely noticed Nancy beside him, proudly brandishing a tequila bottle like a trophy from a battlefield.

Mike saw him almost immediately. The world narrowed when their eyes locked. It was frightening how much nothing else in the world mattered when Mike was watching him like that.

Time seemed to slow as Mike walked towards him. Will knew then it

was stupid to ever think he could stop himself from falling in love with this man. He had as much choice in this as he did in the rotation of the Earth around the sun. He was going to be rotating Mike for as long as they both lived. That was Will's role in this life. To see the stars and the birthday cakes and the Christmas mornings in the eyes of Mike Wheeler.

"Hey," Mike said.

"Hey," Will said.

In the background Will could hear Nancy squealing in delight as Jonathan hugged her tightly, could hear Zoey going high-pitched the way girls do when they encounter other members of their species, could hear El and Hopper loudly exclaiming how happy they were to see her.

"Go," Mom whispered, just for Will to hear.

He kissed the top of her head, appreciating her in a way he'd never been able to before.

Mike shrugged out of his outerwear, leaving them hanging precariously on the overburdened hooks by the door. Then he fished something out of his coat's pocket and held it awkwardly in both hands even though it was small. Will recognized it immediately. A Christmas present. Wrapped inexpertly in snowman paper and tied in a sloppy red bow. Will felt close to crying again.

He leaned heavily against the wall beside the phone to stop himself from keeling over, his hands sandwiched between his body and the drywall.

Mike came to hover beside him, a dark, looming presence, devastatingly handsome in his black suit and tie over a black button down, like some kind of Hollywood star. He scuffed his black boots along the floor, in a gesture that could be interpreted as nervous.

"I didn't get you anything," Will said, breaking the not-uncomfortable silence between them.

"That's okay," Mike said, speaking more to the small box in his hands

than to Will. "I wanted you to have this."

Mike extended the present to him and Will accepted it, paper crinkling under his fingers. It weighed surprisingly little, even for its size. Will held it reverently, afraid to open it because he didn't think he could love Mike anymore than he already did and he might explode from loving him too much.

So instead of opening it he said, "I told them."

Mike blinked. "Told them...?"

"That I'm gay."

"Oh," Mike exhaled. Was he relieved? Did he think Will had meant he'd told them about him and Mike? Did he not want them to know? Will's chest constricted at the thought. "How did they take it?"

"See for yourself." Will jutted his chin in the direction of his mom and Hopper, who'd taken up on the dance floor now that Jonathan and Zoey had vacated it. They were swaying to a waltz that was entirely against the rhythm of the upbeat music, which was somehow more endearing than if they'd been dancing to a ballad.

Mike's perpetually ruby lips stretched into a sweet, tender smile, and Will was overcome with an urge to kiss them.

"I'm glad," he said. Then he turned back to Will. His gaze was unavoidable, like falling into a manhole. It took Will's breath away. Falling, falling, falling into him. Falling, falling, falling in love. He'd been doomed since he was four years old.

"Why did you come?"

"I wanted to see you."

"Do you see me?"

"I see everything." His voice cracked on the last word and Will suddenly realized their conversation was so much bigger than the words they were saying. "Open your present."

“I don’t open presents until Christmas morning.”

“Well, this isn’t a Christmas present.”

“Oh? Then what is it?”

“It’s a Will Byers present.”

“Oh, in that case.”

Will smiled as he tugged off the ribbon, got his thumb under the corner of the paper and flinched as it tore. He got it off enough to reveal the lid of the box, which he pulled off. Inside was tissue paper. Under the tissue paper was bubble wrap and inside the bubble wrap was a tiny figurine, no taller than Will’s pinky, on an octagonal stand, but he recognized it instantly.

“Is that... Is that Will the Wise?”

“Yeah.” Mike rubbed a self-conscious hand over the back of his neck. “I know this guy back in Chicago, carves custom D&D miniatures by hand. Took him months but it was worth it. Looks just like him, right?”

Will was right. He was going to explode from loving him. His hand closed around the miniature until its edges were etched into his palm. He had to take a moment to gather himself before he could speak. “Mike, it’s...”

“Do you like it?”

He looked at him, trying to convey every emotion he was feeling in just the shape of his eyes and hoping that Mike understood because he would never have the words to explain it. “I love it.”

Mike let out a long, relieved breath, sagging a bit against the wall beside Will. “I’m so glad. You don’t even know how I was stressing out about it, it’s-”

“Wait,” Will said, his inebriated mind finally catching up to the math his subconscious had been doing. “Did you say it took *months* to get this made?”

“Yeah, the guy had this really long wait list and he really puts a lot of detail into-”

“No. No, no, no. I mean,” Will massaged his temples, trying to order his thoughts. “How? No, that’s not the right the question. I mean, why would you get me a present months ago when you didn’t even know I was going to be in Hawkins? I haven’t been back since I went away to school. No one knew I was coming back except for my parents and Jonathan and...” His head snapped up. And of course El was looking right at them. When she saw Will looking back at her, she made a face and shrugged. *Goddammit*, Will thought. *We are seriously going to have to talk about this lying shit .*

“Will,” Mike said. He hooked his fingers under Will’s chin and turned him to face him. His seriousness gave Will pause. “I’ve been waiting for you to come back since you left.”

“But,” Will argued, trying to make sense of it all. “We ran into each other outside the lab. You didn’t know I was going to be there.”

Mike smiled but it didn’t reach his eyes. “I followed you there.”

“Shit.”

“Are you mad at me?”

“No,” Will said before he realized it was actually true. “No, I’m not mad at you. I’m just...” He could still feel the miniature digging into his skin where he clutched it. “I don’t know what I am.”

“I’ve been coming home for Christmas every year because I thought you might finally come back. It’s the only reason I’ve been coming home.”

“Shit. Mike. Don’t say that.”

“Why not?”

“Because you’re killing me.”

“Ever since that day, when I said those things to you, I’ve been trying to find a way to make it up to you, or to tell you how I feel, or to just



see you again and know you're okay. I haven't stopped thinking about you for four years."

"Please stop."

"Why?"

"You know why."

"Will."

There was something about the way he said his name that made Will look at him, really look at him. This was the eye of the storm. This was the place apart from the world. This was the real alternate dimension. Will stood at the edge of something and was looking down. There was nothing but darkness. He had to take it on faith that he wouldn't die if he fell down there. He had to trust that Mike would catch him.

"I love you."

## 9. Part IX: What Else Is There To Do?

At first Will wasn't sure which one of them had said it. When he saw Mike watching him with the same nervous anticipation one awaits bad news from the doctor, Will knew it had been Mike. Mike had been the first one to say it.

Will was on another plane. He had transcended this mortal coil and was floating three feet above his own body. He was in that other place, the one between pages of a book, the one suspended between movie frames, the one that happens between heartbeats. Will Byers wasn't happy. He *was* happiness.

Mike was starting to shift uncomfortably. "Say something."

Will inhaled deeply, feeling more drunk now than he had two minutes ago. The world was colors and warmth and was spinning lazy circles around him. He didn't know how to live in a world like this, not when he'd existed in darkness and shadows for as long as he could remember. He was in uncharted territory. And he'd never been so glad to be lost.

"Mike," he began. "Since I met you, you've been every good song on the radio. You've been every quiet night in the middle of the woods. You've been every wonderful thing on every perfect day. Losing you was the worst thing that has ever happened to me, and so, so many bad things have happened to me. These last two days have been... everything. Just, everything, to me. I can't even tell you. I could talk until the sun burns out and I still wouldn't be able to find the right words to tell you what you mean to me. Mike Wheeler, I lo-"

Mike was kissing him, swallowing his words. He was kissing him and holding him and this is what his mom had been talking about. This was opening up to someone and falling and being swept away by them. This is what Will Byers looked like complete.

From somewhere there was a wolf whistle and they broke away from each other. "Get a room!" someone catcalled, he didn't even know who. His cheeks were hotter than he was comfortable with. But along with the embarrassment was the bone-deep satisfaction that Mike

had kissed him in front of everyone and hadn't even cared.

Mike actually laughed. Then he linked his fingers with Will's and tugged him down the hallway. Will let himself be led willingly. He would follow Mike Wheeler anywhere.

Mike shut the door to Will's bedroom behind them. Will placed the tiny Will the Wise statuette reverently on the table beside his bed. He delighted in how much this felt the same as last night and yet entirely different. There was no restless anxiety or urgency or the vivid-dream feeling of being undefeatable because none of it is real. They knew now this was real. They knew that they wouldn't disappear if they let go of each other. They knew that everyone outside knew exactly what it was they were getting up to in here, and it didn't matter in the slightest. They could take all the time they wanted, because they had all the time in the world. Or, rather, they had one tiny slice of suspended time, and they could live in it for the rest of their lives.

Mike and Will lied down on his bed together, fully clothed and on top of the sheets. They lay side by side, facing each other, watching each other, captivated by each other. Will traced the lines of Mike's face with his fingertips. The arches of his eyebrows, the bow of his red lips, the angular rise of his nose, the patterns hidden within his freckles. After letting himself be touched, Mike did the same to him, his long, pale, pianist's fingers ghosting over Will's face, down to his throat, where they lingered over a place Will knew he had two moles.

Will worked a finger under the knot in Mike's tie and tugged until it came loose. Mike pulled Will's sweater over his head and took his time undoing each button down the length of Will's shirt before he started in on his own. Will wriggled out of his pants and his shorts, kicking off his shoes and socks, and watched Mike do the same. His heart still fluttered when the white lengths of Mike's skin appeared, the novelty of it all still exciting but Will was sure he'd never tire of it.

They kissed and stroked and licked and bit and held. Will wanted to be known by him. He wanted Mike to take and he wanted himself to be taken. He wanted Mike's mouth to make him forget the distance between New York and Chicago. He wanted Mike's hands to take

away his fears. He wanted to lose his insecurities between Mike's thighs. He wanted his doubt to dissolve on Mike's tongue.

When Mike stretched over the side of the bed to reach his pants, retrieving his wallet from the pocket and a silver wrapper from within, Will caught him by the shoulder to stop him. Mike hesitated with the packet between his teeth, a worried expression making its way onto his face.

"I'm, uh, still pretty sore," Will explained, turning his face slightly away from Mike's in embarrassment.

"Oh," Mike said, then, "Ohhh. Oh, yeah, of course. I'm sorry, I didn't-"

"It's okay," Will laughed at his distress.

"Does that mean you, um, don't want to..."

"Well..." Will rubbed a hand over Mike's bicep, more muscle there than when he'd been in high school. "You could always... you know..." He let a mischievous smirk tug at his lips. "Unless you don't want to, of course. It can be pretty painful the first time."

Mike leaned down and nipped at Will's bottom lip. He stayed close to whisper huskily, "What makes you think it'd be my first time as a bottom?"

Will was about to splutter something when Mike suddenly rolled them over, their positions matching their earlier ones on his couch but for Mike's legs bracketing Will's own.

Mike held the condom up to Will with two fingers, one eyebrow arched. "Don't look so surprised. Twinks tend to do their fair share of the catching."

Will accepted the condom with a wry smirk of his own. "I don't know if I should be offended by that or not."

"Offended as a twink or offended as a bottom?"

Mike yelped as Will bodily flipped him over, forcing him to

inelegantly flop down on his belly and nearly bounce off the bed. Will flattened himself against the smooth expanse of Mike's back and kissed his shoulder, his neck, the spot behind his ear that made Mike shiver underneath him.

"I like to think of myself as versatile," Will murmured in Mike's ear.

Mike huffed a laugh into the bedspread that was darkened by arousal. "It *has* been a while, though. So..."

"Take it slow?" Will suggested between kisses to the freckles splashed across Mike's shoulders.

"Yes, please," Mike sighed.

Will climbed off of him to rummage inside his bedside table drawer and retrieve the bottle of lube he knew would be inside. Mike watched him from where he'd pillowed his head against his arms, cheeks and neck already flushed in anticipation. Will kissed him once on the lips before resettling behind him, a sweet, fleeting kiss that spoke more of their mutual affection than a passionate one could have.

Will pushed apart his thighs and Mike automatically levered himself onto his knees and elbows. Will let himself give in to a moment of jealousy, thinking of how many times Mike must've been in this position to have become so accustomed to it, and how many men must've been in the same place Will now found himself. He bit into the inside of his cheek and forced himself to stay in the present, to remember that he'd had his own lovers in the past but they had nothing to do with his feelings for Mike now, or, rather, having had experience made him all the more certain that his feelings for Mike were genuine - and he had to hope the same was true for Mike.

When Mike reached behind himself to catch Will's arm and drag him down for another painfully sweet kiss, Will had no doubt that it was true, and felt the jealousy dissipate as quickly as it had coalesced.

Will trailed kisses from Mike's jaw, down the nobs of his spine, to the rounded, lily white curve of his ass. He popped the cap of the bottle and drizzled a healthy portion of lube into his cupped hand. He

slathered it over Mike's entrance, the dark haired young man hissing at the sudden cold, then gasping as Will's fingers invaded him. Just one at first - slow, like he'd asked. He pushed it in and out of him gently, just getting him reaccustomed to the feeling of penetration. Will kissed his lower back and his hip to keep him relaxed, but he bit down hard into his flesh by way of distraction when he added a second finger. Mike squawked in an unmanly way at both but Will felt him tremble slightly when he soothed the bite by laving at it with the flat of his tongue.

Will loved how hot he felt inside, the way his muscles contracted around his fingers making his dick twitch in anticipation. But he kept his promise and remained patient. Stretching, opening, preparing. He waited until Mike's sharply angled shoulder blades sagged, relaxed, before he went searching out his prostate. He heard, more than felt, when he brushed against it, because Mike simultaneously cried out and jolted as if stung by a livewire.

"Shut up," Mike groaned at Will's sudden outburst of laughter, which devolved into a full on groan when Will continued to graze the pads of his fingers over the tight bundle of nerves.

"You're just so sensitive," Will smiled against Mike's side, still peppering his skin with kisses, stopping occasionally to suck a satisfying dark spot onto him. "You *sure* you've done this before?"

Mike's hips were starting to gyrate with the motions of Will's fingers, pushing back onto his hand, chasing the sensation, his breath starting to come faster. "Shut up."

A bead of precum leaked down Mike's thigh from where Will's cock rubbed idly against it with the languid movements of Mike's hips. Will's fingers twitched inside Mike, making the other boy moan. He wanted so desperately to be in him. He couldn't fathom why it hadn't occurred to him before, before when he'd thought he would be complete only with Mike inside every inch of him. Even when he'd fantasized as a boy about being with Mike, he'd never dared dream he'd take this position. He couldn't have imagined Mike submitting to anyone, anything, let alone him, Will Byers, weakling and victim. It was an entirely new level of arousal to think of Mike baring himself like this, becoming vulnerable for him, with him, and trusting Will so

implicitly.

Will didn't want to lose himself inside of Mike anymore, he didn't want to be swallowed whole, consumed until there was no Will left. He wanted to be what Mike wanted him to be: an equal, a partner, strong, someone worth submitting to. He didn't want to disappear. He wanted to be solid, solid, solid, he wanted to be real, real, real. He wanted to be Will Byers: complete human. He wanted to be himself but without shadows. He wanted to be a person worthy of Mike, because he loved him and he wanted him to be with someone who deserved him. He wanted to be deserving. He wanted to be everything, if only for a short while, everything for Mike Wheeler the same way Mike was everything for him.

By the time he had three fingers inside him, Mike's pelvis was canting in a frenzied rhythm against Will's hand, grunts and groans escaping him in half-choked whispers, his fully hard cock weeping precum onto the bedspread. Will was enthralled with the sight of Mike fucking himself on his fingers. He could've watched him all night. He wished he could have. But his erection was throbbing with want of him and he felt he might burst from it if he didn't bury himself inside him soon.

Mike whined at the loss of Will's fingers, craning his neck over his shoulder to watch Will fumble the condom out of its wrapper with lube-slicked and trembling fingers. Once he was entirely sheathed, Will yanked a pillow from the head of the bed and placed it under Mike's hips, pushing down on his lower back until he was fully prone.

"You're a little tall for me," Will offered by way of explanation.

"Aw, I thought I was just right for you," Mike joked, albeit breathlessly, grabbing the remaining pillow from the head of the bed and wrapping his arms around it comfortably, chin propped up as though he might take a nap.

Will snorted a laugh. "You're just right *for* me, but you're still taller *than* me." He reached past Mike to snatch the pillow out from under him and toss it across the room with a muted *phwoomph*.

"Hey!" Mike protested.

Will countered that by grabbing a fistful of Mike's hair and shoving his head down into the mattress, an act that made Mike moan gutturally. Will pressed his full, if not considerable, weight down upon him and hissed in his ear, "This is how I want to fuck you."

Will watched Mike's hands fist into the bedspread. "Yes, please," he panted.

Will sucked a hickey into the spot just below his ear before he pushed himself back up onto his knees between Mike's splayed thighs. He kept one hand clutched to the bony jut of Mike's hip, to steady himself and keep Mike still, while he used the other to steer his cock into Mike's loosened entrance. Will's breath caught and he had to stop, not having anticipated how ridiculously tight and hot Mike would feel around him. His head had barely made it past the first ring of taut muscle and he was already trembling, trying to rein in with deep, steadying breaths the pulses of pleasure coursing through his belly and threatening to bring about an eager, premature release.

Mike's hips strained against Will's hand and pushed backwards, spearing himself on Will's cock and making them both cry out, all thoughts of going slow completely forgotten. Will started rutting into him before he was even aware he was doing it, the animalistic instinct to hump taking control of his muscles, making him ram into Mike harder, faster, than he meant to. Mike threw his head back and moaned, a deep, rumbling, visceral sound of liquid pleasure that Will felt echo through his entire body.

Will hardly knew what he was doing. He was lost to the starburst, blinding, white-noise pleasure of fucking, of feeling himself buried to the hilt in heat and pressure and the flesh and blood realness of Mike. He was making awful noises, pained sobs and pathetic whining, punctuated by incomprehensible babble and cursing as Mike's hips rose off the pillow to meet his own, as Mike's hands found the edge of the mattress and clung for dear life and he cried out for Will not to stop.

Will had been close before they'd even begun. The orgasm that had been so close before was now imminent. Every roll of their hips brought it closer to the surface. He could feel it in his balls, in the tightness of his stomach. He wrapped his arms around Mike's middle,



feeling the strain and tremble of his abdomen as they fucked, put his ear to Mike's back and listened to his heaving breaths, the rumble of "fuck, fuck, fuck, Will - Jesus - fuck" in his chest. He wanted to ride this crest of the wave forever, this pinnacle of pleasure before he finally climaxed. He wanted to ride Mike and feel, listen to, taste, smell the pleasure he was giving him. He was in that blissful empty place just before the end. He was warm and full and complete and so terribly in love.

And then the quiet, empty moment was over. He crested the wave, cried out against Mike's skin, and came. He came in the same mind-numbing, soul-altering, earth-shattering way he did when he was with Mike. He emptied himself interminably, body convulsing, holding onto Mike as though one or both of them was being pulled away. He held onto him until it passed, until sight and sound returned to him, until the quaking subsided, and then at last he slid bonelessly off of him and collapsed onto the mattress, staring up unseeingly at the pockmarked ceiling, trying to remember how to breathe.

He felt kisses on his throat, his collarbone, the tickling of Mike's hair against his chin, the strength and weight and warmth of Mike's arm across his chest. Will closed his eyes, sighing happily into the embrace. Then started suddenly and turned to Mike urgently.

"Oh shit, did you come?"

Mike burst out laughing. An inelegant snort-laugh that was at once endearing and maddening. He tried to bury the laugh under his hands but couldn't contain it. Will started by gaping at him, then frowning at him when the laughter persisted, and eventually glaring followed by a quick cuff to Mike's ear.

"Ow, ow," Mike complained, rubbing his ear but still laughing. "You really, *really* have to do something about that spacewalk you go on when you come." Will pouted and Mike rolled his eyes, grinning. "Yes, I came. Idiot." He thwacked Will with the nearby, notably gooey, pillow.

"Yuck!" Will cried, laughing himself as he wrestled the pillow away from Mike and wrenched off the cover, using the clean side to wipe

the smeared come off his chest where he'd gotten sneak-come-attacked.

Once the pillowcase was balled up and safely tossed across the room, and the used condom was safely tied off and tossed in the vicinity of the pillowcase, Mike pulled Will onto his chest and wrapped him in a hug so quickly and so tightly that Will wasn't sure they weren't wrestling and fought back on instinct.

Mike chuckled at Will's flailing limbs. "What're you doing, spazz?"

"What're *you* doing!" Will demanded, finding himself somehow pinned underneath Mike.

"This!" He made an animal growling noise and bit Will's arm just above the inside of his elbow.

It legitimately hurt and Will cried out in pain.

Mike's head shot up, the playfulness in his face immediately falling. "Are you okay? I'm sorry - I didn't mean to hur-"

He was cut off by Will pushing him onto his back and blowing a huge, sloppy, wet raspberry on his stomach.

"You little asshole!" Mike shouted, laughing so hard he doubled over, holding his sides. Will laughed too, feeling as free and empty and light as fresh pressed paper.

He loved this feeling, this post-orgasm feeling of being purged, this feeling of newness, every rustle of fabric against his skin a foreign but wonderful sensation, every laugh of Mike's a brand new sound that burst like bubbles against his ears. If he'd wanted the orgasm to last forever, he wanted this feeling to last forever even more. He always wanted to be as happy to see his Clash poster as he was right now. He always wanted to be this excited to walk his fingers over the bubbling wallpaper on the wall behind his head. He always wanted to surge with warmth at the feeling of Mike's lips against his even though they were both still trying not to laugh. He always wanted to feel like he was going to float to the ceiling when Mike took him back into his arms and breathed in his hair and whispered in his ear that

he loved him. He always wanted to hear that Mike loved him. He wanted to hear it every day forever. Forever. *Forever* .

Will woke up slowly, sluggishly, as if dredged from a great depth. He blinked at the watery sunlight sifting through the gauzy curtains over his window. He felt moist and stiff and sore *everywhere* . He tried to stretch but realized then that some of the moistness wasn't his own. It was the buildup of sweat between his own naked body and Mike's. *Mike* . The discomfort radiating through him dissolved under the sheer beautiful warmth that flooded his chest when he remembered yesterday. From the morning phone call to falling asleep in each other's arms while the Byers' Christmas party raged on just outside. Mike had stayed. Mike loved him and he had stayed.

Will rotated slowly in the vise-like grip Mike had around his waist so he could look at him. He'd had his mouth pressed against the nape of Will's neck and Will could feel he'd left behind a wet spot of saliva there, something that might otherwise have been gross but Will instead found utterly charming. He was charmed by everything Mike did, including the soft snoring he was still engaged in, like a very tiny lawn mower had gotten trapped behind his nose. Even the little bit of drool that had pooled in the corner of his mouth was charming.

Despite the way his bones were complaining from having held the same position for too long during the night, the way his arm was burning from having slept on top of it, and the uncomfortable accumulation of sweat on his back from being pressed against a hot body for hours, Will decided to lay there and watch Mike sleep. He hadn't seen him sleep since he was sixteen and they had had what turned out to be, unbeknownst to either of them, their last sleepover.

They had stayed up until nearly two in the morning marathoning B-horror movies in Mike's basement. Mike had slept on the couch, face mashed up against the cushions and one arm dangling over the side, fingers just barely grazing the stain-encrusted shag rug. Will had slept on top of a sleeping bag on the floor just beside him. He hadn't studied Mike then, in his sleep. He hadn't dared. What if he'd woken up and caught Will staring? No, Will had thought he had all the time in the world to memorize Mike's face, one furtive glance at a time,

looks stollen when Mike's head was bowed to read, or when he tilted his chin up to gauge the likeliness of rain. Here, he would study the lilt of lips. There, he would focus on the curve of his nose. Bit by bit, inside his mind, until he could call up a perfect likeness of his friend from memory alone.

But Will knew better now. He knew to seize every opportunity to commit Mike to memory. Because in a scant few days they would be parted, for a long while or for good, either one being just as likely. Will was going to take advantage of every second afforded him to categorize every one of Mike's gestures, to index his features, to catalogue his scent. He wanted to remember every moment he'd spent with Mike over the past couple of days with video camera clarity, to replay on dark nights when self-doubt dogged his every move. He could bring up the mental movie of Mike sleeping in his bed, well spent and well fucked, and he could say *I did that. Me. Will Byers. I fucked Mike Wheeler, he fucked me. I loved him, he loved me. Me. Will Byers. And no one else.*

Mike's fan of black lashes fluttered open and Will's heart clenched, mourning the loss of another beautiful moment, now gone forever except for what he'd been able to commit to memory - and Will highly doubted the precision of his memory.

But it was a new beautiful moment. The way Mike's eyes, honeyed in the morning light, sparkled when he caught sight of him, creasing at the corners with that dopey grin of his. He wiped a self-conscious hand over his mouth, rubbing away traces of his drool, then turned the gesture into a languid stretch, releasing Will to interlace his fingers and pull his arms far overhead. Will could hear his bones popping.

The stretch turned into a yawn and finally, after scrubbing his fists into his eye sockets for longer than Will believed could be healthy, Mike said, "Morning."

Will loved the sound of his voice first thing in the morning, all cotton soft and gravelly from disuse. It still thrilled him how deep his voice was now, how he could feel the bass of it echo between his ribs as if the voice were his own.

“Morning,” Will answered.

Mike must’ve seen something in his expression because his smile faded, a cloud passing in front of the sun. He touched his knuckles to Will’s cheek. “You okay?”

Will was taken aback. “Of course I’m okay.”

“Are you sure? You look...”

Will frowned. “How do I look?”

“Sad,” Mike finished.

Will’s gaze slid off of Mike and came to rest on the tiny silhouette of Will the Wise, knocked onto his side at some point during last night’s activities but at least still on the nightstand. He looked as if he had fallen nobly during a battle. “I guess I am sad. A little.”

“What about?”

Will shrugged. Mike groaned.

“Don’t do that.”

“What?”

“We talked about this.”

Will knew what he meant. That didn’t make it any easier. Will rolled until he was on his stomach, face buried in the pillow. He could still feel Mike’s heat all up and down his side, like a sturdy wall shot through with hot water pipes. The thought lightened Will enough that he was able to bring himself to speak. “I don’t...” He began, voice muffled in the pillow. “*Like* talking about... my feelings.”

“But you’ve seen someone, right?” Mike’s voice was quiet, slow and stilted like he was trying not to scare off a wild animal. “Like, a psychiatrist or something?”

Will nodded, the pillow making *shush shush* noises every time his head moved.

“And you’ve talked to them about... your feelings?”

Nod, nod. *Shush shush* .

“And it’s still hard?”

“I didn’t say it was hard,” Will mumbled, the fabric under his face now moist from his own breath. “I said I didn’t like it.”

“Baby.” A tentative hand caressed his back. “Can you look at me, please?”

Will sighed histrionically, but he gave in and turned his face enough to free one eye. Mike was propped up on an elbow, looking down at him. He smiled patiently.

“Both eyes, please.”

Will sighed even more dramatically but did as he was told.

“Thank you.”

“What?” Will demanded, a tad petulantly, meaning *now what?*

“Did you believe me when I told you I love you?”

“Of course.” Will was surprised by the rawness in Mike’s expression, as if he truly thought Will might not have taken him seriously.

Mike relaxed a near imperceptible amount. “Good. Because it’s true. And it’s only because I love you that I’m asking you to do something you don’t like.”

“You mean talk about my feelings.”

“Yes. Do you still see someone?”

“A psychiatrist? Sometimes. Not much lately. It’s hard to actually see someone about... this.” He made a vague gesture in the direction of his own head. “I can’t ever explain what actually happened to us - me - when we were kids. So I don’t think they’re able to help me as much as they might be able to otherwise.”

“What do you tell them?”

“Depends. I change the story every time. The last couple of times though I settled on a kind of vague description of being raped by a person who killed some people in my hometown and made me watch him do it.”

“Jesus,” Mike gaped, horrified.

Will shrugged, the words too familiar to provoke anything other than a resigned numbness. “It’s the closest I could get to the truth. When you think about it, it’s not that different. The Mind Flayer invaded my body against my will, used me, hurt me, and I had to sit helplessly inside my own mind while he used the Demodogs to murder the soldiers, Bob...”

They gave Bob’s name a respectful berth, letting it sit between them long enough to feel that they’d honored his memory.

When the moment had passed, Mike said, “Well, when you put it like that...” He was trying to make light, but they’d crossed into dark territory, too dark to be illuminated by gentle quips. Instead, Mike leaned into the gravity that wanted to pull them down, taking advantage of Will’s willingness to open up. “I never thought of it like that, in real terms, what it would look like, everything that happened to you. I’m sorry I never did, because if I had, maybe I’d have realized sooner how much pain you were in.”

“It’s okay.” Will was picking nonexistent dirt out from under his blunt nails, just for something to do. “It probably wouldn’t have made a difference.”

“Of course it would’ve made a difference!”

“How?”

“I don’t know, maybe we could’ve gotten you help sooner.”

“I was already getting help. Mike, I’ve been seeing someone about this stuff since I was first taken by the Demogorgon.”

Mike looked wounded. “You were seeing a psychiatrist the whole

time? And you never told me?"

Will sighed and rubbed a hand over his face. It was too early for this. "We've been over this. I didn't want you - I didn't want *anyone* - to know what was going on with me. And the only thing that would've changed is you would have all pitied me, or acted like I was a broken thing that needed protecting. And none of that would've stopped the Mind Flayer from possessing me, or stopped me from getting trapped in the pocket dimension during the War, or stopped you from cutting me out of your life because you convinced yourself that you were hurting me."

"How many times do I have to say I'm sorry about that?"

"None! No more times!" Will tried to rein in his rising voice. "I'm not asking you to apologize. I get it. I forgive you. I don't know why we're having this conversation again!"

"Because you're clearly not okay with it!"

"I'm not okay with you taking my emotional temperature every time I look kind of sad! I'm entitled to feel sad! I spent years thinking I couldn't be with you and I now that I finally am, I can't *stay* with you! I'm allowed to be sad about that!"

Mike bit back the words he'd been queuing up on his tongue. He flopped back onto the bed, staring up at the ceiling. Will wondered if he was looking at the same "N" shaped crack his eyes always seemed to lock onto.

Mike closed his eyes and exhaled a drawn out sigh. When all the breath had evacuated his lungs he said, "We're a mess, aren't we?"

Will chewed on that, tasting it for validity. Then he agreed, "Yeah. We are."

A sharp rapping at the door made them both jump nearly out of their skins.

"Boys!" Came Will's mother's cheerful voice. "Breakfast!"

Will had spent the past few mornings with his stomach in knots over



coming out to his parents, but breakfast had not sounded more unappetizing than it did right now.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Sorry this one was a little short, but hopefully it was worth it. Thank you so much to all of my commentators and kudos-ers and subscribers and bookmarkers! I get a little jolt in my heart every time I see a new comment and it never ceases to brighten my day! It's hard to stew on something for months (or a year, in the case of this fic) and then bring it into the light, and I'm so happy to see that it was worth it and it's bringing so much joy to so many people. I love you all, my darlings! <3

~Freak

## 10. Part X: Over

### Notes for the Chapter:

Sorry I'm late again this week! Halloween threw all my plans through a loop. But hopefully this very upsetting chapter will make up for it! :cackles maniacally:

Everyone's been speculating since forever about Mike fucking up the relationship. In this chapter - yes, that's right, in THIS chapter - we finally get to put that issue to rest!

Thank you to all my darling who've been commenting, subscribing, bookmarking, and kudosing - you are all saints who deserve a special day a year on which to be celebrated! <3 I hope I don't break all your hearts TOO much with this chapter.

All my love,

~Freak

## Part X: Over

Breakfast was as awkward as Will had predicted.

There were too many people at the table and more than half of them were hungover, while at least a quarter of those were passing judgement on Will and Mike's relationship.

Will and Mike were squeezed next to each other on one end of the table, elbows knocking into each other every time they attempted to use cutlery. A folding card table had been added to the other end to accommodate the influx of guests. Darius, Nancy, and Zoey sat at this kid's table, the usurpers in the Byers' household.

Nancy's makeup was smeared and streaked, and it seemed that only

half of her head had been attacked by a leaf blower. Zoey didn't appear to be faring much better. Jonathan was wearing sunglasses to the table, something entirely unnecessary considering both their indoor location and the overcast weather.

Mom alone was oblivious to the household's discomfort, despite her own red-rimmed eyes and the way she winced every time a fork was set down with a bit too much force. She soldiered on bravely, refilling coffee cups and ladelling larger and larger portions of scrambled eggs onto everyone's plates. The only one who was eating with any zeal was Eleven, whose appetite was legendarily unflagging - as Will recalled, she had once eaten an entire bowl of spaghetti while in the same room as an eviscerated Demodog.

Mom was valiantly trying to keep a conversation going, even when monosyllabic answers and half-grunted replies threatened to deter her.

"You kids looked like you were having fun," she was saying to the kids' table. "How long did that card game go on?"

"Too long," Darius said, massaging the bridge of his nose.

"Who won?"

The middle generation exchanged looks. Darius was again elected as speaker of their congregation. "I don't remember. I think we stopped keeping track after the... fifth hand?"

"What were we playing again?" Zoey asked no one in particular.

"I have absolutely no idea," Jonathan murmured.

Silence settled in once more. Mom struggled to manifest a topic of conversation out of thin air.

"Nancy!" She cried suddenly. Nancy jumped as if struck. "We really have to get together, you and your mother and me. You know we still play canasta every other week? How long are you going to be in town for?"

"Not long, actually," Nancy said, sounding genuinely apologetic.

“We’re leaving tomorrow. What time are we supposed to be at the airport, Mike?”

“Like eleven thirty, something like that,” Mike mumbled, pushing soggy eggs around his plate with a slice of over-cooked bacon.

Will’s ears were ringing. He was so shocked that words were tumbling out of him before he could stop himself, “You’re leaving tomorrow?” He sounded desperate and borderline hysterical but he couldn’t be bothered to care.

Mike’s Adam’s apple bobbed on a dry swallow. His voice was quiet and tight when he answered. “Yeah, but-”

“When were you going to tell me?”

“Today,” his voice was getting steadily quieter, like someone was leaning on his volume button.

“You were going to tell me today that you’re leaving *tomorrow* ?” Meanwhile Will’s voice was growing steadily louder, shriller. He’d known their time together was limited, but he hadn’t known exactly how limited. He’d thought they’d at least have a few days to sort things out, or at the very least have a few days to enjoy each other. But tomorrow. *Tomorrow!*

“Can we talk about this later, please?”

“That sounds like a great idea,” El said. Will caught her gaze and she shook her head at him. *This isn’t the time or place*, that look said.

“Are you going to stay for present opening?” Mom attempted to change the subject.

Nancy welcomed the change gladly, seamlessly picking up the offered thread. “I’m sorry, we can’t. Our parents are expecting us back for our own present opening. We’re actually probably already late.”

“Oh, that’s too bad. But you’ll say hi to your mother for me, won’t you?”

Will tuned out the rest of the conversation with the deafening whine

of his own thoughts, tumbling and tumbling over each other. Will had woken from a dream to find that not only had they already crossed the bridge they had been planning on examining when they arrived at it, but it was also already on fire.

*Later* Mike had said. He had put it off or deflected whenever the subject had come up. Of course he had! He hadn't wanted to tell Will he was leaving the day after Christmas because he'd known Will would have freaked out, the way he was freaking out right now, and probably would've put a stop to their "relationship" right then and there.

Tomorrow. He was leaving tomorrow. All the fears Will had been trying to ineffectively shove aside came flooding back with a vengeance. Long distance relationship, Mike getting lonely and cheating on him, Mike breaking his heart, his heart breaking into too many pieces to put back together. Chicago and New York. Chicago and New York. It was over. It was all over.

Sure they would try, of course they would try. The first few months there would be phone calls every night. Mike might drive out to see him during a long weekend. Will might even take a Greyhound out to Chicago if he could get the time off work. But the distance would prove to be too great. They'd become too busy for the constant phone calls, both of them juggling school and work and social lives. Driving is too time consuming and planes are too expensive. The time between their visits would grow and the distance between them would seem to elongate. Will would become embittered, wondering why Mike wasn't calling, wondering why he couldn't make the effort to come out and see him anymore, even while he was doing the same thing, for which Mike would come to resent *him* .

The resentment would turn to spite, and coupled with loneliness and sexual frustration he would go out one night, to a bar, somewhere harmless, and someone would come on to him, just a casual flirtation, but he'd be too weak and bitter to resist, too hungry for contact to pass up the opportunity. Will didn't even know which one of them he was picturing in this scenario anymore, it could be either one of them, both. In a single night, in a moment of weakness, one of them, both of them, would irreparably sully the purity of their relationship together, this precious thing built on years of friendship

and love and trust. That's what distance did. It destroyed. It had destroyed stronger relationships than theirs, and it would pulverize their fragile, fledgling relationship into dust. Worse than dust. Air. Nothingness. Like it had never even existed in the first place.

It was over. Over. Over before it had begun. And it was over too soon. Will hadn't had the time to memorize his face yet. But that was weak - he could've stared at Mike for years and never be able to fully commit every detail to memory. They hadn't made love a third, fourth, fifth time. But that was weak too - there wasn't an acceptable number of times, no number would ever be enough. He hadn't told him he loved him. He almost had, but Mike had stopped him. Why? Why had he stopped him?

He had to tell him, he had to tell him while there was still time. But what was the point? To just get the words out of himself? To purge himself of them so the loss of him might not chaffe as badly? Better to keep them in, where they're safe, where they can keep him company on the endless, Mike-less nights ahead. Better to horde them, dragon-like, insulating his heart against the chill of loneliness. Saying them would only make it real. And it can't be real. Because if it's real then he's losing the person he loves, the person he's in love with, the only person he's ever been in love with.

Mike was right beside him but to Will he was already gone. Gone. Gone. Over. Over. Done.

Mike lingered at the door, just as he had not two nights ago. But then there had been a giddy promise to the goodbye, a breathless *to be continued* dancing in the air between them. Now Will stood, nerve-deadened, numb, letting the winter chill buffet him as Mike shifted awkwardly from foot to foot, needing to leave but knowing that leaving Will now was a mistake. The tension between them now wasn't an exciting, anticipatory one. It was the teeth-bared tension of a tightwire, dizzying vertigo at every angle, the knowledge that if it snapped they'd plummet instantly to their deaths.

Mike took hold of Will's face. Will could barely feel his hands on his skin. He searched Will's eyes, a reader scanning a text for the

information he'd missed the first time around. He didn't find it. "We'll talk about it later, okay?" His voice was low and earnest.

"Okay." Will's voice was a lifeless, spineless thing one pulls out of a clogged drain.

Mike's brow furrowed, worried. "I promise. We'll talk later."

"Okay."

Mike pursed his lips, at a loss. He ducked down and kissed him. Will couldn't imagine what it was like to kiss him then. He probably would've had a more satisfying kiss with a three days dead carp.

When Mike pulled back the lines of worry on his face had deepened. "I love you," he said, like a last ditch effort, like a man reluctant to reel back in his fishing line when he'd been sure he'd felt a tug earlier.

The words made Will want to throw up. Just last night he'd been prepared to offer up those self-same shameless words without regret. Now, they represented every ill emotion and turbulent doubt roiling in his gut like food poisoning.

Will smiled, a cold, thin thing that didn't reach his eyes. "I'll talk to you later."

"Yeah. Later."

Will watched him go, his hesitant steps tracking through the snow, disappearing inside the black Pontiac, Nancy already waiting for him in the passenger seat. Will watched him drive away, falling out of sight behind the silhouettes of naked trees.

*Out of sight, out of mind*, Will thought. Then he shut the door before he ran after him.

Mike sits at the end of the sofa, knee bouncing, eyes fixed on the snow coated front lawn outside the window.

“You’re up, kiddo,” Dad says, holding a skinny box in front of Mike.

Present opening is very ordered in the Wheeler household, now that all the children are out of the “child” stage. They take disciplined turns, opening one present each until there are no gifts left. This is Mike’s second gift. The label tells him it’s from his father, while the last had been from his mother, a hideous sweater he’s currently wearing and sweltering in. The only comfort is that Nancy and Holly have been the recipients of sweaters nearly identical to his own, and misery loves company.

Nancy and he were chided for arriving late, but Mike was able to charm his way back into his parents’ good graces by telling them they were spending quality brother and sister bonding time. Their parents know so little about who they are these days that it was an easy enough lie for them to swallow. *What perfectly mature children we must have*, they’re probably thinking. *We really must have done a good job. Back patting all around!*

*Give me a break*, Mike eye rolls.

He makes a great show of shaking the box, trying to guess what’s inside it. His parents watch him with rapt attention while Holly is already hard at work with her newest gift, a label maker, and Nancy is hard at work swallowing eggnog.

He carefully slits the tape with his thumbnail, opening the fussily wrapped paper as neatly as he can manage. A watch. Great. Who doesn’t love a watch? *Certainly not me, owner of a watch in perfectly good working order. Who couldn’t use more watches?*

He forces a smile onto his face and holds up the watch so his mother can take a picture of him with his new gift. The flash momentarily blinds him. He’s still seeing spots from the last picture.

“Thanks, Dad.” He says. “It’s great.”

“No problemo, son. You’re up, Nancy Drew.”

Nancy sets aside her half-empty mug to grimace a smile at their dad and accept the large, flat parcel she’s being presented.



Mike lets himself tune out again, eyes drifting back to the window, leg starting to jump again. He can't unsee the look of Will's face when he said goodbye to him this morning, the way he'd felt when he'd kissed him. His eyes had held that same distant, glassy look as when he'd had his panic attack, but it was somehow worse because he wasn't panicking. It was something beyond panic. It was the bland acceptance of suffering, like the look in the eye of a dog that's being beaten for the hundredth time, or the look of one of those starving children in the TV commercials that's going to bed hungry and has gone to bed hungry every night of his life. It was worse than panic because at least panic was *something*, panic meant fighting against circumstance, it meant there was still will to live. What Mike had felt when he'd kissed him was the cold numbness of giving up, and suddenly Mike doesn't doubt for a second that Will would be capable of killing himself.

The thought won't leave him alone. He replays their parting over and over in his mind, from the moment at the table when Will learned Mike would be leaving tomorrow, to the way he blanched when Mike said "I love you" for the last time.

He'd known what a fragile state Will was/is/has never stopped being in. That's why he'd decided not to tell him about his travel plans, he knew it would only upset him. Besides, it's not like plans can't change. Nothing's set in stone. He also didn't want to bring up his plans because he didn't want to put undue pressure on Will. Wouldn't it be moving too fast if he delayed going back to Chicago just so they could spend more time together? Wouldn't Will feel pressured to behave in a certain way or to see their relationship in a certain way if Mike did? He'd been planning to keep it under wraps, to see where they were at on the day he was supposedly set to leave, before he made any plans to go or stay; maybe even find out when *Will* was set to leave and then coincidentally find that he was leaving on the same day. *Would you look at that? We're going home at the same time. Who'd have thought?*

But then Nancy had to open up her big mouth. How was he supposed to explain in front of her and Will both that he was trying to keep his travel plans open? He might've been able to explain it to Nancy in private, or lied to Will and told him he'd never had a set day to leave.

But he'd been put in an impossible position. Lie in front of his sister and hope she didn't call him on it in front of everyone, humiliating him and proving to Will that he was a liar and far more attached to him than he'd thought, possibly prompting a Will panic attack; or tell the truth, that he wanted to stay as long as Will was staying, and run the same risk of both humiliating himself and causing a Will panic attack.

The best he could do was promise to talk about it later, when he might be able to explain himself to Will in a calm, non-threatening way. It was the only outcome with the greatest hope of successfully navigating the mindfield of Will's emotions. Mike can only hope that "later" isn't too late, and that Will isn't spending this time digging himself deeper and deeper into the pit of despair, too deep for Mike to help him out with a ladder of logic.

Mike leans forward to rest his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands. Will is exhausting. He's like one of those spinning things on the playground, the roundabouts. It's exciting and dizzying but often terrifying, as you hold on tight, squeeze your eyes shut, and pray you don't go flying off to your death (Mike had been a dramatic child and had been convinced that most things on the playground would kill him). He's starting to get tired of holding on for dear life. But he's not sure which he's more afraid of: staying on or letting go. He wishes loving Will was easier. But if it were easier it probably wouldn't be love.

"It's you again," Nancy says, handing over another present, this one from her to him.

He takes it from her and can't find it in himself to hold a grudge against her for putting him on the spot earlier. She hadn't known. He hadn't said anything. If he'd been smart, he would have talked to her in the car on their way to Will's. He would have corrected her notions that he wasn't serious about Will or that his sexuality was a passing fad; he would've told her that he might be staying in Hawkins longer than he thought, or would've at least told her not to mention the length of his stay. He might've also told her not to mention to Will that he had spent his summer in California with Dustin and Lucas and Max, or that he'd changed his major three times, or that he had only spent a month in France before he became

horrifically homesick and had come back with his tail between his legs. There are a lot of things he'd rather Will not know and judge him for, just like there are a lot of things that Nancy only knows half the story of and her version of those events paint him in a very unflattering light.

Unfortunately, he'd lacked the foresight to do any of that and had instead squandered his car ride with Nancy, not wanting to disturb the tenuous truce between them by dragging their problems into the light. They'd listened to music the whole way to the Byers' home and let themselves stew in tense silence. He has no one to blame but himself for his current predicament, and that's far worse. He just wishes "later" would come soon. Or at least, not too late.

Will breathed frosty air into his lungs and let it center him. He reminded himself he loved the winter and leaned back against the house's siding, appreciating it and putting everything else out of his mind.

His brand new sketch pad rested against his thighs and his hand was tracing light shapes across its blank surface with his brand new charcoal set. He let the act of drawing carry him away the way it always did, all thoughts abandoned except those he used to control his hand, to plan the next shape, to wonder if the shading he was applying matched the depth of shadow he was seeing.

The woods around his home were at once lonely and lovely in their loneliness, never more so than during the winter when their bark was stripped to a raw gray and their branches shivered in their nakedness, heavy with drifts of snow that every so often gave way and cascaded to the ground. Today, there wasn't even a breath of wind to disturb the stillness of the forest. Only the occasional snow slipping off branches or confused bird balefully chirping proved the woods were real instead of a painted backdrop. Will loved these woods as ferociously as he loved his home, and both held just as many painful memories. Love was like that, double edged. Never the warmth without the cold; or the pleasure without the pain.

*Love is overrated* , Will lied to himself and focused on switching from

vine charcoal to a 6B charcoal pencil and smudging in the stark shadows of the trees.

Will had spent the better part of the last three hours and six presents living his own private hell inside his head, hashing and rehashing every angle of the Mike situation, until he ran himself into exhaustion and simply gave up. He didn't have the stamina to keep fretting over losing him. *So let him leave*, Will thought. *I'll be no better or worse off than I had been four days ago. Let him leave. Better to suffer a little now than a lot later.*

It made sense, when you thought about it. It was the adult decision. Long distance relationships simply don't work. Why put both of them through that? No, no, Will Byers was a pragmatist. And he wasn't a kid anymore, who wouldn't let himself get carried away by a childish fancy like "true love". He was done beating himself up over it too. What was it Dr. Green had said? *What's done is done*, that's what she'd said. *We can't change the past, we can only act in the present to influence the future.* That's what he was going to do. Act in the present.

He was going to act by not acting at all. He wasn't going to seek Mike out. If Mike came to him, fine. He'd tell him what they'd had was nice, he'd enjoyed himself very much, but it was simply over. Maybe they'd see each other again, sometime in the future, maybe even next Christmas, and they could have more fun together. But it just wasn't logistically plausible for them to maintain a relationship while being in two different states. He'd say it all very calmly, just like that. It might hurt them both a bit, but it would be the pulling off a band-aid sort of hurt, not the prolonged, aching, guttural hurt that a long distance relationship promised. And that was a good thing. Mike would see that. Wouldn't he? What did it matter if Will felt like he was drowning every time he thought about it? What did it matter if he broke out in a cold sweat every time he thought about going back to New York knowing he might never see Mike again? That's right, it didn't matter at all. And the sooner they parted ways for good, the sooner Will could get on with the rest of his life.

He was secure in the knowledge that he was doing the right thing for both of them. Wasn't he? Yes, of course he was. But what if... No. It was the right thing and that's final.

*Trees* , Will reminded himself, trying to stay present in his sketch. *Trees, snow, shadow* . *Trees, snow, shadow*. The scratch of his charcoal pencil, the cotton-soft feel of the textured paper under his fingers, the comforting charcoal stains on his hands and under his fingernails. The way his nose was running from the cold. The abandoned birds' nests still clinging to high branches. The numbness of his toes and ass against against the frigid ground, the warmth of his sweater and thermal underwear under the outer layers of his clothing. *Trees, snow, shadow* . He was able to breathe and his breath left him in a satisfying plume. He loved the winter.

The porch's planks groaned as someone rounded the corner of the house. Will didn't look up as Darius sat down heavily beside him, stretching out his long legs so his boots fell in a snow drift. His presence immediately warmed Will's entire right side and he was suddenly extremely grateful for his friend, even if he'd wanted to be alone right now.

Darius blew on his hands. "Jesus, it's freezing out here."

"I like it," Will said.

Darius leaned over to observe Will's sketch. "Beautiful."

Will shrugged. He glanced at Darius out of the corner of his eye. He wanted to tell him he was sorry for ignoring him the past few days. He wanted to tell him it wasn't intentional, that he'd just been caught up in a whirlwind he was only now coming down from. He wanted to tell him he was so terribly grateful for his accompanying him on this trip. But putting feelings to words wasn't Will's strong suit. So instead, he leaned into Darius' warmth and hoped his best friend understood, the way he always seemed to understand.

"So," Darius said, after a comfortable length of silence had elapsed. "That Mike guy finally went home. I was starting to think he didn't have a home."

Will tried to laugh but it came out sounding hollow.

Darius picked up on it, the way he always did. "Trouble in paradise?"

Will twisted his mouth to the side, a facial shrug.

“I still think that guy’s bad news for you. Anyone who’s got you acting crazy is bad news. You’re not made for that kind of drama, you’ve got enough on your plate.”

“Thanks for the concern, but me and him are over.” There was a surge of nausea that came on the heels of that admission, but it was instantly followed by relief. Fighting himself was exhausting. Ripping Mike from his life, while painful, meant at least the whole thing was out of his hands, freeing him from the responsibility of it all.

In his periphery, Will saw Darius’ eyebrows climb. “What brought that on?”

“I thought you didn’t like him?”

“I don’t, it’s just pretty sudden, considering you were acting like two horny teenagers just last night.”

“Yeah, well, I realized that he’s going back to Chicago tomorrow. There isn’t much of a basis for a stable relationship there so...”

“For what it’s worth, I think you’re doing the right thing.”

It wasn’t very comforting to hear, especially since Darius had been warning him against Mike all along, but he appreciated the sentiment all the same.

“You don’t need that kind of crazy.”

Will smirked. “You already said that.”

“Cause it’s true. You need... support. Security. Knowing someone’s got your back.”

“You seem to know a lot about what I need.”

Will turned and found Darius’ face much closer than he’d anticipated. His breath caught instinctually, until he remembered it was only Darius. But then his friend’s eyes flickered to his lips and he realized what was going on.

He sighed heavily, leaning his head back against the siding. "I thought we said we weren't doing this again."

"Maybe watching you drooling after some bargain-bin Morrissey made me realize I was being a stubborn idiot."

Will laughed, and it actually sounded normal. "He might be a bargain-bin Morrissey, and you might be an idiot, but you weren't wrong. This," he gestured between them. "Is why we don't work. Because I get boring and you get bored, and because when you're gone I spend time with someone else, and then you get jealous and I feel stifled and then we break up."

"It'll be different this time."

"No, it won't." He wasn't mad. Actually, he was smiling. Because it was hilarious, how they could make the same mistake over and over again and not learn from it. "Your wires are just getting crossed, because you're jealous of Mike." *There it was!* Will could've smacked himself. Of course that's why Darius hated him! It had been so long since the last time Darius was jealous that he hadn't recognized it. "Oh my God," he said, laughing. "I can't believe you're jealous of Mike!"

"This isn't about him," Darius was shaking his head. "I want you. I want to be with you."

Will's laughter died out and he leveled a pitying look at his friend. "No, you don't, babe. You just want me to want you the way I want him." He brushed his gloved hand over Darius' stubbly cheek. "You're my best friend, Daer-Bear, and I love you, but not like that. Okay?"

Darius smirked but there was a sadness in his dark eyes. "You sure? We don't have to make the same mistakes again if we know they're coming."

"I'm sure."

Darius took Will's chin in hand and kissed him gently on the lips. He tasted of Mom's burnt coffee. Will sighed into his mouth, relishing the familiarity of it, the warmth and comfort, and for a second, one

second, he let himself imagine getting back together. Memory and wishful thinking combined to form images of them snuggling together on the couch, making love all day and ordering in from their favorite Chinese place, holding hands at Zoey's gallery's latest opening. But the daydream was soured by the very real memories and predictions of future fights. Darius pleading with Will to come with him to the club but Will being too afraid that he'll have a panic attack amid all those bodies and blaring music; both of them icing each other out until one of them is forced to leave the room; Will staying up all night fretting because Darius hasn't come home.

By the time the kiss was done, Will knew he'd made the right decision. As easy as it would be to say yes to Darius, he needed his friendship more than he needed a romance that would always end poorly. He placed a last, lingering kiss to Darius' mouth, as a final goodbye to the idea of 'them' before let-

"Fucking Christ."

Will knew the sound of that 'fucking christ'. He'd heard it often enough over the past few days.

Will and Darius' heads whipped around to find Mike standing not ten feet away, two steaming styrofoam cups of Joe's hot cocoa in his hands and a look of such utter betrayal on his face that Will felt dizzy from it.

Will was on his feet in a heartbeat, sketchpad and charcoals falling to the ground forgotten. "Mike, this isn't - it's not -"

"Not *what*?" His voice was scathing, every syllable a lash meant to wound. "Not kissing your ex-boyfriend? Because I have fucking eyes. Jesus fucking Christ, I can't believe I thought - I'm such a fucking idiot."

Will hadn't seen him like this in years, not since the fight that had ended their friendship four years ago. He was starting to back away and Will's heart was exploding from the need to stop him, to explain, to say *fuck Chicago, fuck New York, I love you, please don't hate, please don't hate me* -



"I swear it's not like that!" His voice was pitched up one octave too high and he feared he was dangerously close to crying. "I swear to God, Mike, *please* -"

Mike was still backing away so he made a grab for him, latching onto his arm.

"Don't fucking touch me-" He jerked his arm hard out of Will's grasp and in the process sent a wash of scalding hot chocolate directly at Will's face.

Will screamed, hands flying to his face. It felt as though his head had been shoved into a fireplace or against a lit stove. His knees went weak from it, his stomach turned over from it. He was probably crying, but he couldn't be sure.

Over the sounds of his own screaming he could hear Mike's voice.

"Oh God, Will - I'm so sorry - I didn't mean - Will, oh God -"

And Darius' voice.

"Get the fuck away from him!"

"I'm sorry, I didn't -"

"Don't touch him! Get out of here before I call the cops, asshole! Get the fuck out!"

Strong arms were wrapping around him, pulling him down to his knees. "Shhh, shhh, it's okay, you're okay, come here." Hands were pulling his own from his face, then pressing something cold to his skin that had him screaming again. "No, no, no, stay still, stay still, it's to help you, okay?" He let the cold be pressed to his flaming skin. He endured it because after a second or two it started to feel better.

Then he heard the pounding of many footsteps against the porch, voices carrying over to him.

"What happened?"

"We heard shouting!"

“Will, what’s wrong?”

“Are you hurt?”

“Everybody shut up, let’s get him inside.”

But none of the voices were Mike’s.

## 11. Part XI: Kids Two

### Notes for the Chapter:

We're almost at the end, children.

The feels are real.

## Part XI: Kids Two

1988

Mike hadn't slept all night. Every time he'd closed his eyes he'd seen Will's face. He couldn't believe how stupid he'd been. After everything Will had been through and Mike still hadn't been able to stop himself. He hadn't even known what he was doing until it was already happening. He hadn't even known he'd *felt* that way until it was already happening. Will had been his best friend since he was five years old, when had he started thinking about him like that? When did his heart start racing when Will took off his shirt? When did he start finding himself staring at the slope of Will's neck when they were in Algebra, or thinking about the color of Will's eyes when Will was excitedly explaining a new episode of *Quantum Leap* ? When had he started thinking of Will in terms of *want* and *need* ? Why couldn't he have stopped himself from kissing him yesterday?

He couldn't do this to him. He couldn't do this to his best friend. It was bad enough he was... not straight, or whatever he was, he didn't need to visit it on someone as vulnerable, as breakable, as Will. Bullies had been hissing "fag" behind his back for years, the last thing he needed was for Mike to give fuel to those rumors. He just needed to come out and tell him that it had been a mistake and he wasn't going to do it again. Scout's honor.

But what if Will, God, poor Will, who only ever wanted Mike to like him, what if he thought that he *had* to be with Mike like that, for Mike to like him and still be his friend? That's probably why he'd gone along with it in the first place, and hadn't thrown Mike off like a normal person would have. He might even tell Mike he wanted him

too, and would Mike even be able to tell the difference? Would he be able to tell if Will really liked him the same way, or if he was just pretending so Mike wouldn't leave him?

And what if he agreed to forget the whole thing and they tried to go back to the way things were? Did Mike really think he'd be able to stop the same thing from happening again? He hadn't been able to stop himself the first time! It had just... just... *happened* ! All of a sudden he was kissing Will and had his hands all over him - Jesus, down his *pants* - and then they were... they were doing... *that* . What guarantee did he have that even if he promised not to do it again, he wouldn't find himself alone with Will and suddenly be on him?

He could try to never be alone with Will.

That would never work. He and Will were alone all the time. If that suddenly stopped everyone would figure out something was up.

Mike felt so trapped it was like he was suffocating.

He loved Will. More than anything. Probably more than he'd ever loved El. The last thing he wanted to do was hurt him. But the options were hurting him a little now or hurting him a lot over time. They both sucked. They sucked so hard, but what was he supposed to do? Will had suffered so much, more than any of them, and he didn't want him to have to suffer more, especially not because of him. There was no easy way to do it. Explaining what was going on with him, telling him the truth, wasn't going to work. Will would just try harder to stay by his side, lie if he had to, kiss Mike and tell him he wanted him just so Mike would stay. He didn't have a choice. He had to do it this way. He didn't have a choice.

"Hey, man, you look like shit." Dustin was as sensitive as usual.

Mike had been pushing food around his cafeteria tray since he'd sat down twenty minutes ago. Twenty minutes that Will was late to lunch. Would he even come? He hadn't seen him today except in Algebra, and he hadn't been able to get a good look at his face then. Did he hate him? That might save Mike the trouble of having to go through with this, though it didn't make it hurt any less.

"Maybe you're getting the flu," Dustin continued, chewing noisily on a carrot. "Flu's going around. Gabe McAllister got it and he's been puking for a week. No joke."

"Thanks for talking about puke while we're eating," Max said dryly, putting down her slice of greasy cafeteria pizza.

"Hey, guys."

Mike's heart stopped. Will. He couldn't look up. He couldn't meet his face. He couldn't do this. He couldn't do this he couldn't do this he couldn't -

"Where've you been?"

"Um, Mr. Ryans needed to see me about a thing. Uh - Mike, can I, um, can I talk to you? Like, in private? Just for a second."

Mike could barely hear through the deafening roar of his blood rushing past his eardrums.

"Are you guys planning a surprise birthday party for me?"

"No, Dustin, they're not planning a surprise birthday party for you."

"Even if they were, they wouldn't *tell* you, dingus."

As Mike followed Will out of the cafeteria and into the hall he heard Dustin shouting after them, "I like chocolate ice cream cake! With sprinkles!"

The hallway was uncomfortably quiet. Mike could feel his heartbeat in his throat, choking him. He still couldn't look Will in the face. He didn't think he was going to be able to go through with this.

"Hey, are..." Will started, his voice soft and tentative. "Are we okay? You left kinda fast ye-yesterday, and I thought maybe you were mad... at me, or something...? And you kinda won't even look at me today so... maybe... maybe you are. Are you mad at me?"

Mike shut his eyes. This was torture, and he hadn't even said anything yet. *Let him hate me. Better for him to hate me than for me to*

*hurt him. Better for him to hate me.*

“...Just leave me alone...”

He'd spoken too quietly, Will hadn't heard him. “What?”

“Leave me alone.”

This time he heard him, but he didn't understand. “*What ?*”

“I don't think it's a good idea for us to hang out anymore.”

“Wh... why?”

“Because I don't want to be friends with you, is why.” He was going to be sick.

“*Why?*” Will sounded like he was crying, or about to cry. Mike kept his eyes firmly locked on a bulletin board of upcoming school events.

“Because I'm don't wanna be friends with a *fucking fag* is why!” His voice echoed off the walls, buffeting him, stinging him. *I'm sorry*, he thought desperately, wishing, hoping, praying that Will somehow knew, that he knew deep down that he didn't mean it, he didn't mean any of it, that he was doing this because he *loved* him, because he loved him more than life and he would rather drag himself through broken glass than make him suffer. *I'm sorry, Will. I'm so sorry. I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry*. “Stay the fuck away from me. I don't wanna catch AIDS or whatever. Go hang out with some other fags. I bet they'd wanna be your friends.”

There was a harsh sob that was hastily stifled, and at first Mike wasn't sure which one of them it had come from. But then he heard the unmistakable sound of Will muffling his cries behind his hands. Then he heard the squeak of Will's sneakers as he ran down the hall and away from him.

Mike didn't turn to watch him go. Instead, he walked in the opposite direction. His feet took him mechanically to the boys' restroom. Once locked inside a stall, he doubled over and emptied the contents of his stomach. He heaved until his throat was raw and his ribs ached. He heaved until there was nothing left inside him and then he heaved

some more. When it finally subsided, he rested his forehead against cool ceramic and wept. He was going to burn in hell for this. He knew it. Hell would've been preferable to what he'd just done.

*I'm sorry, Will. I'm so sorry. I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry  
I'msorryI'msorryI'msorryI'm*

---

## **Present**

The door bangs shut behind him.

“Whoa, there, tiger!” He hears his father say. “Where’s the fire?”

But he’s already storming up the stairs, throwing open his bedroom door, and slamming that one shut behind him too.

He paces. He paces the length of his childhood bedroom. He’s crying. He doesn’t remember when he started crying, how long he’s been crying. Did he start crying before or after he burned Will?

Will.

Stupid. Stupid stupid stupid *STUPID!*

He picks up his desk chair and flings it across the room. It splinters into a thousand satisfying pieces but no sooner has the echo of its destruction faded than he feels the throbbing pain again.

He screams. The pain goes away for a moment.

Then it’s back.

He screams louder. He screams at the top of his lungs. He screams his throat raw. “STUPID!” He screams. “STUPID, STUPID, STUPID!”

“Stop it!” Nancy is shouting. “Mike, *stop!* ”

When did she come in? It doesn’t matter.

“I’m so fucking STUPID!” Mike cries. “I thought I was done paying

for what I did to him but that's just a fucking *lie* - I'll never be done, I'm gonna pay for it forever and ever and I'm gonna rot in the fucking ground and I'll still be paying for it-

SLAP

Mike staggers back. He lifts a hand to his stinging cheek. He lifts his eyes to Nancy, who stands there red-faced and purse-lipped.

"You hit me," Mike says numbly.

"You were hysterical," Nancy says slowly, trembling with forced restraint. "Now. Will you tell me what the hell is wrong with you or do I need to call someone, like the police?"

Mike falls more than sits on the bed. It all feels so distant suddenly. Like it's happening to someone else. It's easier to handle when he thinks of it like that, like the events of a fictional character's life. "I thought he loved me."

"Will?"

"I thought he'd forgiven me. For what I did. He didn't. He lied. He wanted to hurt me, because I hurt him."

Nancy sits down beside him, her brow drawn in concern and confusion. "What happened?"

"He kissed someone else."

"Who?"

"Does it matter?"

"I guess not."

"I think I maybe burned him."

"You *what* ?"

"With, um, with hot chocolate."

"Jesus."



“Not on purpose. It was an accident. I, um...” He swallows thickly. The relieving numbness is starting to wear off and the hurt is starting to creep back in. “I think I really might have hurt him, Nance.”

“It was an accident. I’m sure he’s fine.” Her soothing, comforting tone makes Mike worry all the more. It’s the exaggerated tone you use when you’re trying to convince someone of something you don’t actually believe.

“Nance.” His breathing is tight as he fights to hold back a fresh wave of tears. “I hurt him when we were kids too. I did a really bad thing. I-”

“I know. You called him a fag and told him to stay away from you.”

Mike turns to her, stunned.

She shrugs a skinny shoulder. “Jonathan tells me everything. So you think this was all some kind of revenge? That he plotted to make you fall for him so he could turn around and break your heart by kissing someone else?”

Mike laughed wetly. “When you say it like that, it sounds stupid.”

“That’s because it is stupid, stupid.”

“Then why would he do it?”

“Who was he kissing?”

“Darius.”

“Well, that makes sense.”

“What do you mean ‘that makes sense’?”

“Those two are always on and off again.”

“Jesus. I *am* an idiot.”

“No, you’re not. Hey,” she stands abruptly. “You know what this conversation needs?”

Mike just stares at her.

“Tequila,” she supplies.

“I think you drank it all last night.”

“Damn, you’re right. How about whiskey?”

---

“Well, you’re lucky Darius got that snow on there so fast,” Hopper said, standing back. “Else it could’ve been a lot worse.”

Will gingerly touched the right side of his face where Hopper had just finished applying a coat of aloe vera. It felt tight, like his skin was stretched across too much bone.

“It’s gonna be sore for a while, and probably start peeling tomorrow. It’s gonna itch like crazy, but that’ll be the worst of it.”

“Kind of like a sunburn?”

“Yup. You’re lucky you didn’t get any in your eyes or we would be having a very different conversation right now, probably in the hospital.”

“That’s a lot of luck.”

“You’re one lucky kid.”

Will scuffed his boots along the bathroom tiles while Hop washed and dried his hands. Everyone was waiting outside the bathroom for them. He could almost hear them holding their breaths.

Instead of opening the door, however, Hopper sat down on the edge of the bathtub. Will stiffened. This was going to be a “talk”. He could tell by the way Hopper had folded his arms and was trying to catch his eye, even though Will was avoiding his.

“So. Are we going to talk about what happened?”

Will shrugged. His default answer during “talks”.

“Was this Mike’s doing?”

He found himself breaking the silence he’d promised to keep, needing to defend Mike. “It was an accident.”

“I didn’t say it wasn’t.”

Will could feel Hopper’s eyes boring into him, studying him with that detective ferocity. Hopper had this way of always making him feel like a microscope slide.

A silence settled over them, one so weighty and long it had Will squirming. Was Hopper waiting for him to say something? To confess? What did Hop want from him? At last, when Will was just about ready to bolt for the door, Hopper said, “When you go out there, I want you to do the right thing, and stop stringing those boys along. Do you hear me?”

Will started, but nodded, still not taking his eyes from a line of grout between two mismatched tiles.

“You pick one, or you pick neither. Your mother raised you to respect others. Are you treating those boys with respect by acting this way?”

Will mumbled something.

“What was that?”

“No, sir.”

“That’s right. You’re not respecting them and you’re not respecting yourself. And don’t think for a second this has anything to do with them being boys. If you were stringing along two girls, you can bet your ass we’d still be having this conversation. Understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

“So what are you going to do when you leave this room?”

Will hesitated. “I’m... going to talk to them?”

“And?”

“I’m going to pick one or neither?”

“Is that a question?”

“No, sir.”

“Good. Now, we’re gonna leave it at that, because I think you’ve learned your lesson. Unless you need me to spill some more hot coffee on you.”

Will huffed a breathy laugh. “It was hot cocoa.”

“Now who’s a wise ass?” But Will could hear the smile in his voice.

Hopper stood, a looming presence above him. “Come here,” he held out a hand to Will, sounding almost begrudging.

Will accepted the hand and let himself be pulled to his feet. Hopper wrapped him in an awkward, one-armed embrace, patting his back firmly and just a little too hard.

“Hey, you’re a good kid.”

“Thanks, Hop.”

“You know I love you, right?”

“Yep.”

“Okay.” He hastily kissed the top of Will’s head and let him go with a last hard pat between his scapulas. “I’m gonna give you a second. You think about what I said, alright?”

Will nodded.

After Hopper left, Will could hear him explaining his condition to his anxious family. He couldn’t make out most of the words, but he could hear the reassuring tone in Hop’s deep, rumbling voice.

Will sat back down on the toilet lid, elbows on his knees, eyes on that line of grout. He was thankful for Hopper. He was thankful for his

family. He was thankful for their acceptance and their support. He was thankful he only had a first degree burn. He was thankful for Darius' quick thinking. But despite all he was grateful for, he was profoundly miserable.

Before his talk with Hopper, he'd been on the verge of complete despair, convinced that he was in a hopeless situation with no escape. Hopper, however, had laid it out in clear lines. Pick one, or neither. It sounded like an oversimplification, but it was the root of the problem. No, of course getting back together with Darius wasn't an option, but, the thing was, Mike actually was an option. He'd just never let himself consider it. It had taken Mike hating him to make him realize that he couldn't *not* be with him. That his mother had been right and it was worth it to take the risk of breaking each other's hearts if it meant they could be together, if it meant he could feel the way he'd felt last night when Mike had wrestled him to the bed and they'd laughed themselves sore. Will thought his heart couldn't handle what Mike might do to it. But the truth was, his heart couldn't handle not having him at all.

"Pick one or pick neither" didn't mean choosing between Mike and Darius or nothing, it meant choosing between possible heartbreak and definite heartbreak. Or saying fuck it, to all of it, and choosing happiness. Saying fuck New York and fuck Chicago and going wherever Mike was because he wanted to be with him. Who needed school? Who needed his apartment? Who needed his job at the diner? People move all the time, he could be one of those people. Because he was saying fuck it, and he wasn't going to let Mike go. He was done with walking on eggshells around his fragile heart and his fragile sanity. He was picking neither. He was saying fuck it and choosing the nuclear option: he was going to do whatever the fuck he wanted for a change. It was about time.

When Will left the bathroom he let himself be fawned over. His mother and Zoey wanted to see the damage, saying things like "poor baby" and "it's terrible, just terrible" with voices that were just a tad too high. Jonathan assured him it didn't look bad at all, while Eleven assured him he'd probably be disfigured for life. He managed to pull himself out of their holds long enough to lean over to Darius and whisper that he wanted to talk to him.

Using a mysterious skill that Will deeply envied, Darius was able to extricate them both to Will's room. Will didn't bother to sit down once inside. He didn't think this conversation would take long. Scratch that. He didn't *want* this conversation to take long.

"I think you should probably sleep on the couch for the rest of the trip," Will said after a pause.

Darius didn't seem surprised, only saddened, the way he had when Will had told him they shouldn't get back together.

"And..." Will continued, hesitant. "When we get back to Brooklyn, I think we should take a little break... from each other."

Still no surprise. Darius had always had a way of knowing Will better than he knew himself. It's how they always ended up hurting each other so deeply. "I, uh... I got a friend who's looking for a new roommate."

Will watched him tip his head back, trying to keep the glistening in his eyes from running over.

"I'm sorry," Will said quietly.

"Me too."

Darius looked back down at him once he'd gotten ahold of himself. "You gonna work things out with that Mike guy?"

"I'm gonna try."

"After what he did to you?"

"It was my fault. It was an accident."

"Yeah, that's what battered women say."

"Don't do this," Will pled.

"Okay, okay." Darius inhaled deeply, recentering himself. "You're right." He took a long moment to watch Will and Will watched him back, unflinching for once. Finally he asked, "Why do we keep doing

this?”

“We’re slow learners,” Will smirked wryly.

“Are you sorry you brought me?”

“Of course not. And I’m not saying we shouldn’t be friends. I still need you in my life. But...”

“I know. We can’t keep doing *this* .”

“Yeah.”

“Can I get a hug?”

Will smiled and closed the distance between them that moments ago had seemed an entire ocean. Darius’ arms were strong and comforting around him and Will forced himself not to lean into the embrace more than was necessary. This wasn’t a goodbye. It was a “later”. It was a “it’ll be over before you know it”. It was a “we share something no one else does and that’ll never change, but we need to figure ourselves out for a little while.” Will’s body always found a way to communicate what his words could not.

---

Three hours later, Nancy and Mike are both sprawled on his bedroom floor, the once full bottle of Sullivan’s now mostly empty beside them. Nancy has her legs propped up against the bed in a sort of reverse sitting position.

They’ve talked at length. They’ve talked more than they have in two years put together. Possibly more than they have in their whole lives. Mike told her everything, from his absurd reasoning behind severing ties with Will back in high school, to the call he got from Eleven telling him that Will was going to be coming home for Christmas this year, to not wanting to tell Will he was staying because he was afraid of Will rejecting him. In turn, Nancy had told him everything Jonathan had ever told her, even the stuff he’d sworn to Will he hadn’t. She told him about Will and Darius’ relationship, how they often got back together because of jealousy and broke up because of

it too.

She assured Mike that Will probably hadn't meant to hurt him, even if it wasn't a comfort to hear. She also told him it was probably better this way. He didn't need the complications that came with Will and Darius and 'all of them', likely also referring to Jonathan and his new girlfriend. She said it probably wouldn't have worked out between them anyway, since long distance relationships never worked. "Just look at me and Jonathan" she'd said, and Mike had to admit she had a point. She and Jonathan had been inseparable during their senior year. "Soul mates" everyone had called them. Then they both went to their respective colleges, vowing to maintain a long distance relationship, and they were only able to keep it going for a year before it crumbled. The best they were able to do was stay close friends, though Nancy still harbors a deeply concealed resentment she would never openly admit to but Mike can see all the same.

She said he was lucky it was over now, before they'd had a chance to really get invested in each other.

Mike doesn't feel lucky.

He feels like shit.

He's also disgustingly drunk.

"I'm sorry I didn't believe you," Nancy slurs. "About, you know, being serious about Will."

"S'okay." Mike feels like he's rising and sinking, his stomach lurching every time he drops. He wishes he weren't already lying down so he could lie down again. "I wouldnt'a believed me either."

"No, no, it was a shitty thing to do. Your brother comes out to you and you don't believe him? Just 'cause he gave up being a vegetarian?"

"And came back from France after jus' a month."

"Right. I mean, being gay's not like France."

"Bi."



“What?”

“Being bi’s not like France.”

Nancy’s face scrunches up. “I don’t know what those words mean.”

“M not gay . I’m *bi* . Bisexual. Both ways. I’m a pitcher for - I mean I’m a *bat* - I *bat* for both teams.”

Nancy laugh-snorts. “That’s not a real thing.”

“Is too. ‘Cause I’m... that thing.” Was he about to throw up? Nope. Just a burp. That was a close one.

“Then you’re gonna be totally fine. You have, like, twice as many people to choose from than the regular people.”

“I don’t want other people. I want Will people.”

“No you don’t. He sucks. Byers boys suck.”

“Yeah they do. But I want one anyway.”

Nancy rolls over onto her side without taking her legs off the bed so that she’s awkwardly twisted. “You know, you’re a good little brother. I’m happy you’re my little brother and not someone else.”

“Thanks.”

She puts a hand on his forehead. Then moves it back and forth. The motion makes Mike nauseous. “You’re gonna be alright,” she says.

“No m’not.”

“Yeah. You’re gonna be fine.” She gives his forehead a last weird rub and withdraws her hand, closing her eyes like she’s going to fall asleep. “You’ra cool dude.”

“You’re alright too, I guess.”

“...I love you, Mikey...”

“Love you too, Nance.”

Mike stares up at the ceiling. He remembers waking up this morning and seeing Will's ceiling, with its popcorn texture and "N" shaped crack. He remembers thinking he wanted to wake up next to Will every day of his life. He closes his eyes when his vision goes blurry with tears.

"Stupid," he tells himself. Why did he think he ever deserved to be happy, after what he'd done to Will? What made Mike think he deserved him?

## 12. Part XII: Chicago

### Part XII: Chicago

Will was pacing. On the couch, El was taking advantage of the house being empty to lazily flip the pages of her magazine using her powers instead of exerting energy by using her fingers like normal people.

Will stopped his pacing and stood in front of the phone. It seemed to judge him. His fingers almost wrapped around the receiver. And then he was pacing again.

“Call him!” El shouted from the couch.

“I will!” Will shouted back. He found himself in front of the phone again. This time he picked it up, he brought it to his ear, he heard the dial tone. Then he slammed it back in its cradle and began pacing anew.

“Oh my God!” Eleven cried dramatically, throwing her head over the arm of the couch. “If you don’t call him in the next two minutes, I’m going to dial that phone myself.”

Will stopped and stared at her, aghast. “You wouldn’t!”

She pinned him with an icy glare. “Try me.”

El had spent the night in his room. She had been sleeping on the couch because her room was actually Jonathan’s old room, and with him being in town, accompanied by a lady friend, it was only fair he get his room back. But since Darius was now holding the esteemed honor of couch-surfing, El had swapped with him and slept in the bed alongside Will. Given that they were (legally) brother and sister and that Will was gay, no one had any problems with this. It was actually a great comfort to Will, who spent most of the night talking with her about the “Mike situation.”

El had told him that the first Christmas after everyone had left for college she had run into Mike in town. He had asked her if Will had come back to Hawkins for the holidays, to which she’d responded

that he hadn't and why did he care, didn't they hate each other? Mike had told her that he wanted an opportunity to apologize to Will for how he'd behaved in high school. El had thought he seemed sincere so she agreed to let him know when Will was coming to town. This was why, when Will told her four months ago that he was going to come home to come out, she had called Mike and given him a heads up.

Will didn't blame her, but he didn't appreciate being lied to.

"I thought friends didn't lie," he'd said.

"Friends don't lie, but family does," she'd replied.

When Will had asked her if she thought he was doing the right thing, she'd said she honestly didn't know. Mike was a good guy, even if he was misguided. And Will wasn't too bad either. The point was, if at the end of the day they could look back on it, ask themselves if they were happy, and find that the answer was yes, then it was the right thing to do.

Will had slept little that night. In the morning, he had waited until his mom and Hopper had taken "the kids" to the movies before trying to call Mike. He still wasn't sure what he would say to him. Should he start with an apology? Should he start with something more nebulous, like *we need to talk*, and hope it was intriguing enough for Mike to agree to meet him? Should he open with confessions of love and grand proclamations? Should he even say *Hi, it's Will*, or was even that pretentious? Obviously it's him. It's not like Mike doesn't know the sound of his voice by now. Maybe he should start with something coy, like-

"Okay, that's it," El said, and no sooner had she finished speaking than the phone's handset flew off the cradle and the keys depressed, dialing faster than a human hand would be able to manage.

Will gaped at it, stunned.

"It's ringing," El prompted, sounding bored as she continued to flip the pages of her magazine, not having even turned to look.

Will dove into motion, hastily scooping up the receiver and bringing it to his ear. It was still ringing, though it was hard to hear over the incessant thudding of his heart. He waited. He waited.

*“ You’ve reached the Wheeler home. We’re not here right now but if you’d like to leave a message- ”*

“Dammit,” Will pressed down the switch hook and dialed again. He listened to the phone on the other end of the line ring. And ring. And ring. Until -

*“ You’ve reached the Wheeler home. We -”*

“Shit!” Will slammed the handset down and turned pleadingly to his step-sister.

“I’m on it,” she said, not needing to be told. Without changing her repose across the couch, she shut her eyes and furrowed her brow. She’d come a long way from the days when she’d needed to submerge herself in salt water to scry into the nether.

In less than a minute, her eyes flew open and she bolted upright. “They’re headed to the airport. The plane leaves in forty-five minutes.”

Will was already scooping up the rental car keys and pulling on his parka. He was surprised when El grabbed her coat from off the hook and followed him outside. She rolled her eyes at his confused expression.

“You’ll never make it in time without me,” she explained in her most *duh* tone and jogged ahead of him to the Geo. Will had to admit, she had a point.

Will slammed the Geo’s driver side door behind him and they were pulling away from the house, speeding onto the road.

He looked at El and she splayed her fingers across the dashboard, inhaling deeply and exhaling slowly. There was a frenetic energy about her, like a firework just before it goes off.

“Drive,” she ordered. “I’ll take care of the rest.”

Will readjusted his grip on the steering wheel, ignoring his sweating palms, and focused on pushing the speed limit. He watched as the speedometer climbed steadily up to seventy, then eighty.

“What are you doing?” El snapped. “I said *drive* .”

Will was about to reply that that’s exactly what he was doing, when the gas pedal disappeared under his foot, pushed all the way to the car floor. He heard the Geo’s feeble engine protest, felt the car drag as it struggled to comply with its new orders. But then, without warning, they were flying over the asphalt, the surrounding woods a blur of grey past the windows. It was all Will could do to keep the wheel under control as it tugged and twitched under his hands with every bump on the poorly paved road.

Up ahead, Will espied a fast approaching traffic light, its red eye glaring reproachfully at them. Beyond the light was the town of Hawkins, populated by pedestrians and easily destroyable public property. Will shot El a nervous glance but she was concentrating intensely on the road before them.

Seconds before they passed under the traffic light, it burst from red to green, as did all of the traffic lights ahead of it. They barrelled past storefronts and parked cars so quickly they didn’t even register in Will’s mind. An old woman was starting to cross the street three blocks in front of them, too near for them to stop in time at their current speed. But within the blink of an eye the old woman was yanked back by unseen hands, toppling harmlessly into a neatly trimmed bush.

“Sorry, grandma,” El muttered under her breath.

Several streets in a row had only stop signs instead of lights and Will’s stomach clenched when he saw cars slowing then proceeding through them, oblivious to the wheeled rocket that was about to plow into them. Every beat of Will’s heart brought them closer to the slow moving vehicles. His stomach clenched and he squeezed his eyes shut, preparing for impact. And then heard the squeal of dozens of tires as the cars were pushed backwards from the main avenue. Will blinked and found they had already passed them. He whipped his head around and saw car doors being flung open, confused drivers

climbing out to inspect their vehicles.

“Car trouble?” El smirked.

Within moments they were out of Hawkins, speeding down the highway, going as fast as the rental car was physically capable of going. But that wasn’t enough for El.

Will watched her close her eyes, a vein standing out on her forehead, both hands upon the dash now. Will felt a sickening lurch and knew, somehow he just intrinsically knew, they were hovering off the ground, traveling at a speed never before conceived of for land vehicles. There was no way he’d be able to control the wheel at these speeds. Thrilling as it all was, he was genuinely beginning to panic now. He wouldn’t even have enough time to react to the otherwise gentle curve of the highway, such as the curve that suddenly loomed up ahead.

But then the wheel jerked under his hands and they shot around the bend, without a hair’s breadth margin of error, and Will realized Eleven was in complete control of the car now. His shaking hands released the steering wheel, watching as it swayed gently back and forth to maintain their heading, and he knew he had no choice but to trust his sister completely, not only with reaching Mike in time, but with their lives.

He’d thought he’d had more than his fair share of excitement for one lifetime, and he’d thought never would be too soon to have another life-threatening adventure. All the same, his blood sang through his veins, the adrenaline a familiar friend that pumped his heart full of addictive battery acid, and he found himself pounding the car’s roof and hollering a battle cry. All those times he could’ve died, all the danger and trauma, but the truth was he *hadn’t* died. He was stronger than all those one-dimensional posers at art school who’d never know what it felt like to look death right in the eye, who’d never know what it felt like to save the world.

He was Will *fucking* Byers, slayer of Demogorgons, one-time conduit of the Mind Flayer. He’d taken a torch to a pod of Demodog eggs. He’d burned down the Upside Down and defeated the Beholder. He was *Will Fucking Byers* and he was alive and he was going to be

happy. He was done letting dead creatures from a dead dimension control him. He was *WILL FUCKING BYERS* and he was free.

The Geo came to a screeching halt in front of the airport's departures terminal. Will flew from the driver's side door, not bothering to shut it, not bothering to check the time, not bothering to ask El to find a place to park the car that wasn't in the middle of the road. There was no time, no time for any of it.

He dashed through the automatic double door, sweating under his parka. For a moment he rotated in place, disoriented. But thank God it was a small airport, and just in front of where the security line headed into the terminal proper, Will spotted the tall, dark form of Mike Wheeler. Will exhaled the largest sigh of relief his lungs could manage. He wasn't too late. Will was then able to pick out Mr. and Mrs. Wheeler, and Nancy, and their little sister Holly. Mike's mom was hugging Nancy tightly, and his dad was giving Will a manly squeeze of the shoulder, while the little sister stood back looking uncomfortable. It was a family send off.

Will didn't know what to do with himself. He hadn't thought this plan through nearly well enough - and by *nearly well enough* he meant he hadn't thought it through at all. He hadn't even anticipated that Mike's family would be there. This wasn't the sort of conversation you had in front of your maybe-boyfriend's parents who more than likely had no idea their son was attracted to men.

Not knowing what else to do, Will ambled slowly in their direction. He fluffed his hair self-consciously and pulled down his jacket's zipper to let in some air. When he was close enough to hear their voices he stopped. When Mike turned his head slightly to the left and saw him, Will's breathing stopped. When Mike's face went from recognition to the dead-eyed, shuttered expression of an abuse victim, Will's heart stopped.

Even the other Wheelers noticed, Mike's mom craning her neck to follow his line of sight. When the others saw Will they waved, Mrs. Wheeler even beckoned him over. For a second Will hesitated on the spot, one foot raised and hovering off the ground, wanting to obey a command from a parental figure but also sure - so sure he could feel it resonating inside his bones - that he would rather poke his own



eyes out than have this conversation in front of Mike's family.

Nancy, curiously the only one of them aside from Mike who seemed unhappy to see him, said something in her mother's ear. Mrs. Wheeler looked perplexed, but nodded. She told her husband something and he too nodded. They embraced Nancy and Mike both, for a last time, and started walking towards Will, their pre-teen daughter in tow. At first Will panicked, suddenly sure that they were coming over to say something to him. But they merely passed him by, offering banal niceties ("Good to see you, Will"; "Tell your mother I said hello") as they went.

Will watched as Nancy clasped a comforting hand on Mike's shoulder and left him for the security line.

Mike stayed where he was, a black monolith in the midst of the airport's holiday commotion. It occurred to Will then that this might be too little too late. That he could offer up all of the apologies in the world and Mike still may never forgive him. That he might have ruined his only chance because he'd been an absolute fucking idiot. The fear of rejection was so palpable that Will nearly turned on his heel and ran. It was the same fear, only in a different guise, that had plagued his every step since he was thirteen. It was the Demogorgon, pacing just beyond the flimsy walls of Castle Byers. It was coming to get him and there was nothing he could do. He could feel its breath on his neck, he could feel the Mind Flayer stretching infinite darkness inside him, he could feel the claws digging into his too hot skin.

Mike's head dipped, cascades of black hair falling into and obscuring his face. Will swallowed down the bile in his throat. *There is no Demogorgon*, Will told himself fiercely and forced one foot in front of the other. *There is no Mind Flayer*. Another step. *The fear isn't real. It's just me. It's just me being scared of things that are normal and scare everybody sometimes. I can't let being scared stop me. Because if I let it stop me, I'm just going to stay in the same place I've been for years, too afraid to move. And I'm fucking tired of this place. Even if he says no, even if it hurts, it won't be here. I am Will Fucking Byers, and I'm free.*

Will stopped walking. He was still a few paces from Mike, but this felt close enough. He was trembling, he was sweating, he was nauseous, but he was keeping himself together. He was strong

enough to survive the Upside Down, he was strong enough to do this.

Neither of them was speaking. Mike wouldn't look away from him, his jaw clenched so tightly that Will could see a tendon standing out in his neck. So many speeches he had rehearsed in his head this morning and Will couldn't remember a single word of them. But he knew he had to say something.

So he opened his mouth and blurted, "If you're lost, you can look, and you will find me."

This caught Mike completely off guard. He blinked at Will, his eyebrows coming together in confusion. But just as quickly recognition and then, surprisingly, embarrassment chased each other across his face.

"Time after time," he both finished the lyric and named the song.

"I thought it sounded familiar," Will said, smirking wryly even while his lips quivered. "When you said you'd catch me every time I fell."

Mike scrubbed a hand across the back of his neck. "Yeah, well, you've found me out. I'm a Cyndi Lauper plagiarizer." He cast a more sober look over Will. "I've never been great with words."

"You do just fine," Will said, almost too softly to be caught amid the noisy airport.

"How's your..." Mike made a gesture in the direction of Will's face, his expression pained.

Will's fingers subconsciously traced his jaw. "Fine." He'd given himself a good looking over in the mirror that morning and had been pleased to find his skin only a little pinker than normal and only slightly tender to the touch.

Despite that, Mike was still eyeing him as though half his face had been melted by the Ark of the Covenant. He finally let his gaze drop and released a puff of breath that shifted the hair in front of his face. "I'm sorry," he said, almost too quiet to catch.

Will blinked, because he definitely had planned on the apologizing to

be going the other way. “Don’t be, it was an accident.”

“No, I just...” Mike took a moment to scrub his hands over his face. “I’m sorry about that but also, just, everything. I’m sorry about every fucked up thing that happened to you. I’m sorry about what I did to you in Junior year. I’m sorry I didn’t say sorry sooner. And I’m sorry for trying to take you away from someone you clearly care about. I shouldn’t have thought that just because we made peace and fooled around it meant that you, I don’t know, *owed* me anything. I should’ve known you already had a life for yourself in New York, a life that was completely separate from the one we all had together in Hawkins. I shouldn’t have just assumed that you felt the way I did.”

He paused to run his long fingers through his dark hair and push it out of his eyes. “I get that you’re with Darius now, you guys have a history and... I guess you have a history with me too, but it’s not a good one. So I’m not mad at you, and I’m not going to try to convince you to leave him for me. Just... All I want - all I’ve *ever* wanted - is for you to be happy, Will. If Darius makes you happy, then... well, maybe I’m not happy too, but it’s enough for me. Just promise me we can still be friends. I don’t think I can lose you again, not completely. So please, just tell me you’ll still be my friend.”

Will was stunned. More than stunned. Awestruck. He couldn’t do anything but gape. He could barely stand, all the blood he usually needed to power his leg muscles had coalesced in his brain to force its shocked neurons to connect.

He was quiet for so long that Mike became visibly uncomfortable, then crestfallen, and finally resigned.

“Okay,” he said, voice flat. “I won’t bother you again.”

He began walking and made to move past Will, when Will’s body caught up before his mind did and he launched himself at him, arms encircling Mike’s lean body tight enough to crush the air from him, and buried his face in his chest.

Mike was still and tense as a stone column under Will’s arms, and seemed to grow steadily more tense the longer Will hugged him and continued to say nothing.

The thing was, Will couldn't think of anything to say just yet. Everything that came to him felt insufficient. Mike said he was the one who wasn't good with words, but that was a bold-faced lie. Mike could soliloquy circles around the best of them, meanwhile Will couldn't verbally express himself out of a paper bag.

So Will said to himself *Fuck words* , pried his face from Mike's chest, ignoring the damp spots he left behind on his coat, planted a hand to the nape of his neck and tugged him down into a kiss.

It was not their best kiss. It was only slightly better than the disastrous Castle Byers kiss. But it didn't have to be their best. It just had to say for Will what he couldn't say for himself: "I love you."

It wasn't until Mike blinked owlishly at him that Will realized he'd said it out loud.

Will felt his face heat and he darted his gaze away, even though he still held onto Mike. He couldn't imagine himself ever letting go of Mike again.

"...You do?" Mike breathed, all airy and awestruck and Will wanted to punch him for not having figured it out already.

Will was going to shrug, then he was going to nod, but then he realized that he needed to start using his words or this thing between them would never work, fewer words meant more room for misunderstanding, and they'd suffered one too many misunderstandings already.

"More than I ever thought I could," Will said at last, looking up at Mike from under his lashes.

Mike's looked positively dumbfounded. "But... what about Darius?"

Will shook his head, unable to keep the smile off his face. "What about Darius?"

The line between Mike's eyebrows deepened. "You're together now... aren't you?"

"The opposite, actually."

“The... opposite.”

“For God’s sake,” Will laughed. “I’m trying to tell you I choose *you* , you moron.”

“I’m not a - oh. *Ohh* .” Mike’s eyes widened.

“I came here to tell you that I’m not going back to New York. I’m going to Chicago, with you.”

The corners of Mike’s mouth tilted down into a small frown. “Why?”

“I just said, to be with you.”

“No but, why leave everything you have in New York? School, friends, work...”

“Because none of it means anything without you. I can transfer schools, I can make new friends, I can find another job. But you... there’s only one of you.”

Mike pulled back out of Will’s grip, holding him at arm’s length by his shoulders. “I can’t let you do that. I can’t let you upheave your entire life for me.”

“I don’t care about upheaving my life!” Will said, a tad desperately.

Mike was shaking his head. “But I do. I care about you too much to do that to you.”

Will could feel his heart plummeting, the dizzying high from Mike’s confession turning sour. He tried to ignore the way his sight was misting over.

“Which is why,” Mike continued. “I’m coming with *you* to New York.”

Will’s head snapped up, mouth working open and closed but unable to formulate words. Just when he thought Mike couldn’t surprise him anymore than he already had, he threw another bombshell Will’s way.

"You have everything in New York, but there's nothing waiting for me back in Chicago. I don't even know if I want to stay in college. But there's everything - *everything* - waiting for me with you in New York." Mike's face was suddenly shy, a blush blooming across his pale cheeks. "I mean, if you'll have me."

"I..." Words were still having a difficult time coalescing into sentences in Will's mind. He couldn't believe it. He was going to not only be with the person he loved, but he was going to be able to keep his home. Will had never even stopped to imagine that anything in his life could be this perfect. "Yes! Of course! God - Yes!"

And he flung himself at Mike again. This time, Mike held back, just as achingly tight.

Into Will's hair Mike said, "It might be a little weird what with Darius being your roommate and all. I mean, I could find my own place. We don't have to live together if you don't want to-"

Will laughed into Mike's coat, still soggy from his tears. "Darius is moving out, so there's one less thing to worry about."

"Oh... Because of me?"

"Because of a lot of things." Will pulled back just enough to look up at Mike and savor every detail of his face, not because he had to memorize it for when it was gone, but just for the sheer joy of it, because he was allowed to, because he'd be able to look at him every day of his life. "I can't believe this is happening."

Mike smiled. That dopey, unguarded smile. The one that made everything in Will's body liquify. Will started cataloguing everything about Mike he loved, and he vowed to share it with Mike. One day. Not today. But one day. "Can't believe what's happening?"

"This. Us. You." Will shrugged a shoulder. "I thought I'd ruined everything." He also wasn't used to anything good happening in his life, but he omitted that.

Mike cradled Will's cheek in his palm, eyes going soft. "Never."

He leaned in and kissed him. Not a chaste statement of a kiss, like the

last one they'd shared, but a kiss full of warmth and promise, one that quickly transformed into one of passion, making their breathing ragged and pulses quicken. Will was already a little hard by the time they separated. There were still so many questions to be answered, logistics to be ironed out, but the only thing Will wanted was to drag Mike into the back of the Geo and have him fuck him until he couldn't see straight.

"Why don't we get out of here?" Mike rasped, echoing Will's thoughts.

Will grinned at him, found his hand, and tugged him along behind him, impatient feet carrying him to the automatic glass doors. When they made it outside, however, Will stopped so abruptly that Mike collided with his back and nearly sent him tumbling forward.

Mike's family was there, standing on the bustling curbside, breathing into their hands for warmth in the bitter wind. Will's brows furrowed in confusion even as Mrs. Wheeler's face lit up, and Mike released his hand to step up to her, all warm smiles.

"Did you boys have a chance to catch up?" Mrs. Wheeler asked.

"Yeah," Mike said. "Actually Will needs my help with something so I'm going to head back to Hawkins with him."

The hint of a frown crossed Mrs. Wheeler's face. "Oh, alright. Are you going to be home for dinner? I was going to cook up that salmon in the freezer, but if you won't be there I think there's enough leftovers for just the three of us."

"I don't know actually. I'll call you if I start to run late."

"It'll be too late by then. I have to defrost the salmon. If we don't have it tonight it'll go bad."

"Karen," said Mr. Wheeler, with a long suffering air. "We'll eat the salmon."

"I don't want to cook if I don't have to," she snapped at him.

"Look, I'll just eat at Will's," Mike said, side-stepping the argument

entirely. "I'll see you tonight." He gave his mother a kiss on the cheek and clasped his father's hand in a very professional manner, ruffling his little sister's hair just enough to get her to glare at him, and stalked off in the direction of the Geo, which El had skillfully parked in a loading zone.

Will followed mutely after him, waving awkwardly at the Wheelers as he passed them. They waved awkwardly back. He watched them over his shoulder as he and Mike approached the car, making sure they were no longer paying attention to them as they walked away.

Before Mike had a chance to open the rental car's door, Will stopped him with a hand on his arm and hissed urgently, "I thought you were leaving!"

Mike looked at him with bald bemusement. "I am. Well, I mean, now I'm leaving with you. I was never going to *stay* in Hawkins."

"No! I mean, I thought you were leaving right now! On the - the - the *plane* !"

"The plane?" Mike echoed, confusion making his eyes wide.

"Yes!"

"The one Nancy just got on? The one going to D.C.?"

"The... what?"

"The plane to D.C.?"

Will scrubbed his forehead with the back of his hand, the lurching feeling of reality shifting making him dizzy. "But... but Nancy said you were leaving today. Both you and her."

Mike started shaking his head, a little smile making its way onto his face as understanding started to set in. "I mean, I'd planned to leave today. After seeing Nancy off at the airport, I was going to start the drive back to Chicago, but I decided to spend a few more days here, figuring some things out, maybe getting to talk to you again."

"The drive back to Chicago..."



Mike's smile was slowly turning into an incredulous laugh. "I *drove* here, numbskull. Whose car did you think I was driving this whole time?"

Will had been on the verge of opening his mouth to say *rental car* but decided against it when he realized how stupid that was. Like you could rent a dashing Pontiac like that at the shitty car rental place next to the Indianapolis airport. Will mostly just wanted to smack himself on the forehead for having been this profoundly idiotic. *Again*

.

"Why didn't you tell me you weren't leaving!" Will practically shrieked, drawing stares from several travelers. "I wouldn't have-" He stopped himself. He'd been about to say "freaked out", or "kissed Darius", or "wanted to break things off with you", but he knew suddenly that it wouldn't have mattered. He would've had all of those reactions one way or the other. In fact, expediting things may have even been a blessing in disguise. It had forced Will to make a decision. The right decision, as it turned out.

Mike's laugh subsided slightly, but he was still smiling, dark eyes sparkling. "I told you we needed to talk, remember? I wasn't about to tell Nancy, in front of your whole family, that I'd changed my mind and wanted to hang back until we'd figured out our relationship."

Will had to agree that made sense. And did nothing to decrease the levels of guilt surging up inside him. It was true, he'd never given Mike a chance to explain. What an *idiot* .

Mike must have seen the turmoil in him because his face softened and he pulled Will against his chest. "It's okay, babe. I'm here now, right?"

Will nodded against his shoulder.

"We're together, right?"

Another nod.

"I love you, Will."

Will fisted his hands in the back of Mike's coat, grinning stupidly

against his chest. Four words that made him so profoundly happy. “I love you too, Mike.”

The blaring of a car horn right beside them made them both fairly jump three feet into the air and clutch at their ears. Will wheeled around to find El leaning across the passenger seat, stretching to the now open window, looking up at them with a very unimpressed expression.

“Are you two girls done making up? I’m running out of ways to distract that parking asshole and I’m pretty sure he’s getting suspicious about all the luggage carts rolling into the street.”

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Like any good rom-com, it had to culminate in a chase through (to?) the airport.

That was the last chapter!! Next week is the epilogue and then, alas, no more Time After Time.

It has been such an honor sharing this story with you all. Every week I look forward to pleasing, amazing, shocking, and inspiring you. The reception this fic has had has surpassed my wildest expectations and bolstered my faith in myself. I wish I could keep this going forever, but stories have to end sometime.

I'm working on an original project right now (also mlm and also a period piece) for NaNoWriMo. The plan is to self-publish it (because it's full of the sex and I doubt anyone would want to immortalize it in print) and post a few excerpts here and on fictionpress dot net to bolster interest. So keep an eye out for it.

Thank you, all of you, for your comments, your kudos, and your never ending support. It has meant the world to me. I love you all, deeply, from the very bottom of my freaky heart. Don't forget to read the epilogue next week, we get some unexpected cameos

and a beautiful sense of closure.

Yours always,

~Freak

P.S.: If you're interested in my professional work, I'm a writer for the app Choices: Stories You Play, which you can get anywhere apps are found. I write on the horror book series, It Lives (It Lives Beneath, the second book in the anthology, is currently being released). You can also follow me on twitter at vesilber1389 and on tumblr at freakazoid-13. <3

## 13. Epilogue

### Epilogue

#### One Year Later

Will hesitated at the bottom of the stairs. The sounds of laughter and clinking glasses drifted down to him like rain on the wind. Overhead, the sky was impossibly blue, the Colorado summer evening making everything vibrant and hazy.

Mike paused on the step in front of him, noticing Will's reticence. He placed his slender hands on Will's shoulders, gifting him the grounding sensation that always accompanied that gesture. It was one Will had come to depend on. The taller boy's dark eyes were luminescent in the warm sunshine that fell over them, full of their old concern. That concern had lessened over time, to the point that Will barely even saw it anymore. In the beginning it had been practically ever-present, constantly monitoring Will for indications of distress or the harbingers of panic attacks.

"You good?"

Will nodded and smiled. His smiles were more convincing these days, but Mike had had time to practice and could distinguish Will's false smiles from his genuine ones more easily than even Will himself could.

Mike dropped back to the landing, leaning in close and conspiratorially. His voice was awash in the cool, non-threatening tones he'd perfected when handling Will's emotional pivots. "It's just the guys. Okay? They *want* to see you. That's why they're all here. It's gonna be fine."

"I know, I just..." Will trailed off, struggling to form into words the chaos of his head. He'd been making a concerted effort to speak rather than bottle up. It was healthier that way, Mike always said. "It's been a while, you know? I guess I'm a just a little nervous, is all. Excited," Will added hurriedly. "But nervous too."

Mike's concern eased off his shoulders as easily as shrugging off a jacket. He straightened, smiling a soft, private smile. Not his "head over heels goofy in love smile" - Will still saw that one plenty, though - but one Will enjoyed seeing just as much, because it was their lazy morning smile, their catch each other's eye across the breakfast table smile. It was born inside their relationship and it lived there exclusively. One day it would die when their love did. But so long as it was there, it was theirs only. It was a promise, to each other, that theirs was a sheltered world the evils of the outside could not reach.

"Good," Mike said. "Ready?"

Will reached up and brushed a stray lock of midnight black hair from Mike's long face. It was shorter now, the way Will preferred, but that didn't stop it from constantly getting in his eyes. The gesture was so natural and frequent that Will often didn't even notice he was doing it. He did it in the middle of a crowded restaurant once, and, more surprising than realizing he'd done it, was realizing he didn't care. Not even a little.

"Ready."

Mike took his hand, his palm cool against Will's, and led him up the narrow flight of stairs to the rooftop balcony.

And there they were.

Will was momentarily staggered. So many faces he hadn't seen in years, changed yet somehow the same in all the ways that mattered.

Lucas was impossibly tall, shoulders broad as he leaned back in his chair, one arm draped, not possessively, but with careless affection, around his wife. Max's brilliant red hair was shorn close to the scalp, like everyone had told him Eleven's hair had been when they'd first met her. She was laughing uproariously at something Dustin had just said. Or, at least, Will was *pretty* sure it was Dustin. The curly brown hair was the same, as well as the caramel colored skin. But he'd lost every ounce of baby fat he'd ever possessed. He was all corded muscle and straight lines under his form-fitting short sleeve button down. His wide, winning smile belied the years his missing front teeth were a source of shame.

Nancy and Jonathan were in close conference, wrapped up in some devastatingly political debate, no doubt. Zoey had been left in New York, for this was a gathering of Hawkins survivors only and outsiders had not been invited or permitted. To their other side, explaining his most recent escapade (this time to Southern India) to a dryly amused Eleven, was a tanned and relaxed looking Steve Harrington, his long hair sun-bleached and his wrists bound in tribal bracelets.

They looked good, all of them. Healthy, happy, beautiful. They didn't look like they'd been to hell and back. They looked... lucky. The people that you see walking down the street and envy. The people that order coffee ahead of you in line and make you think, "The world just *works* for people like them, doesn't it?"

A hush fell over the group as one by one they noticed Mike and Will's arrival. Suddenly all eyes were on them and, in one terrifying moment of vertigo, Will thought he didn't know these people. They were strangers, all. They had lives he knew nothing about, they thought in ways he could never understand. They were the "other half," the half Will had always been on the outside of looking in.

He wanted to run then. He'd made a mistake, surely. He'd come to the wrong house. How terribly embarrassing, please excuse me, I never do this, honestly -

But then Mike's hand squeezed his and his world narrowed down to that one point of contact, the grounding center of the universe. Mike Wheeler's hand. And it was then he remembered he'd thought much the same when he'd been reunited with Mike. For a brief while he'd made himself sick over it, thinking that Mike had changed so much since they were kids that he might as well be a complete stranger. Then Mike had told him that his favorite recurring dream was still the same. Will had smelled him and his scent had been the same. This wasn't so different as that. They might look older, they might have lived more since he last saw them, but if Mike was the same in all the ways the counted, then so were they.

Will breathed. In and out. And when he was done breathing, that dreadful moment had passed, and he was looking at his old friends. His face broke out into a smile. A real one.

At the same time, applause broke out. And cheers. And calls of “*There they are!*” and “Will fucking Byers!” and “About time, assholes!” And they were being pulled apart, pushed into seats that were already uncomfortably crammed around the glass table, and there was back-slapping and camaraderie and it was like not a day had passed since Junior year.

Will found himself squeezed between Dustin and Steve. Someone poured him a drink and pushed a plate of finger foods in his direction. Steve started regaling him about a certain tribe in New Guinea that had invited him to sleep beside their mummified village elder. Dustin was telling bawdy jokes about the Stanford Biology department. Across the table, Max was grilling Mike about New York.

Eleven caught Will’s eye and grinned, cheeks dimpling. This meant, “Well, look at you.”

Will shrugged and grinned back, lifting his glass of unidentified alcoholic fluid in a silent toast. This meant, “Yeah. Look at me.”

Some time later, when Steve’s attention was snared by Nancy, who wanted an update on his wanderlust, Dustin leaned close to Will, his voice more subdued than Will had ever heard it. “Hey, uh, you know I’m sorry, right? We all are.”

Will’s face scrunched briefly in confusion. “What for?”

The contrition on Dustin’s face was new too. “For, you know, high school. We didn’t mean to stop talking to you, it was just... fucking weird, you know? Mike wouldn’t tell us why you’d fought and we didn’t want to pick sides but we didn’t want Mike to get mad at us, either. We were just dumb fucking kids.” He paused, looking thoughtfully into his glass. “I know that sounds pretty lame. You always got the short end of the stick, you know, growing up. The worst of the bullying, the worst of the supernatural bullshit. I should’ve been a better friend to you. We all fucking should have.”

“Hey,” Will said, nudging his elbow companionably against Dustin’s. “It’s ancient history. It all turned out okay, right?”

Dustin’s grin broke out on his face so quickly it was as though it had

been been lurking just under the surface the entire time, dying for the opportunity to reemerge. He jostled Will right back, lifting his glass to him. "Fuck yeah it did."

They drank together and Will asked him about his grad program. Dustin asked him what it was like fucking Mike Wheeler. They laughed and drank some more.

The sky faded to dusk overhead and the balcony sparkled with twinkling lights that rivaled the those of the Fort Carson complex beyond. More bottles were opened. Plates were cleared. Someone started signing and was immediately shut up by the group at large. Will was floating on a cloud of near-inebriation and contentment. Their time apart had only strengthened their bonds. They had each wandered into the world of the normal and discovered they didn't belong, because no one could understand their experiences but each other. Back together again it was like reopening a favorite book and rediscovering all of your fondest passages. Separate they were strange, together they were whole. Will loved each of them with a passion he had thought reserved solely for Mike. It might have been the alcohol, it might have been the euphoria of reconnecting with people he'd thought forever severed from his life, but in that moment Will was entirely happy and entirely complete. He'd made it. He'd healed. He was finally free.

"A toast!" Lucas called, holding his wine glass out unsteadily.

"To what?" Nancy shouted.

"To our awesome hosts for letting us trash their place!" Eleven shouted back and everyone cheered, applauding Lucas and Max's hospitality.

"No, no, no," Lucas shook his head dramatically, smiling the kind of broad, unschooled smile only drunks can.

"To Mike!" Steve said. "For bringing us all back together!"

This was met with whistles and shouts of approval, soon followed by a chant of "speech, speech, speech!"



Mike demurred, holding up placating hands. "I wish I could take the credit but I just made the phone calls. It was all Will's idea."

"No shit," Dustin grinned.

"Way to go, zombie boy," Max commended.

"Speech!" Jonathan yelled, hands around his mouth like he was hollering down a canyon.

"Speech!" Lucas agreed.

The chant for a speech was taken up again, and Will felt his old stage-fright returning despite the alcohol sloshing around in his belly. He was entirely prepared to let them chant themselves out until they grew bored and moved on to something else, but he caught Mike's eye across the table and saw that smile, that private smile, and Will found himself on his feet before he even knew what he was doing. Because he knew what he wanted to say.

Silence spread across the balcony like water over sun cracked earth. Everyone was looking to him expectantly, most of them prepared for a sloppy, drunken speech of well-wishing, the rest hoping for something hilarious like him puking or tripping while standing entirely still. What happened instead was that Will started to speak.

"Lucas, Max, thank you, for inviting us into your home."

Applause for Lucas and Max.

"And thank you, Mike, for getting everyone here. I know it wasn't easy."

"You're telling me. Trying to coordinate anything with these idiots is like herding cats."

Laughter all around.

"Almost ten years ago something... extraordinary happened. We found out that our reality was so much bigger than anything we could've dreamed. We lost people, good people, and we made new friends. Good friends. It changed everything we believed in. It

changed our entire lives. It made us a part of something. Even now, that it's all gone, we're still part of it. We always will be. Because it didn't just change our lives. It changed *us* . It changed us so that we won't ever fit in the way other people do, people who will never know what we went through.

"As awful as some of the those things were, what they really did, at the end of the day, is bring us together. We were a bunch of weirdos, some of us friends, some of us enemies. But when those strange things started to happen to us, it tied us together for life. We're a team not just because we fought together but because we *survived* together. How many other people can say that?

"We might be away from each other sometimes, for months, for years. We might be hundreds of miles apart and we might be entire oceans apart. We might never see each other again. But we'll always be together. We'll always be those kids, those stupid kids who ran to another dimension, full of man-eating monsters, to save the world and came back not just alive, but *stronger* for it.

"It took me a long time to realize that. For a long while I thought I was going crazy, I thought I was gonna break. I'd felt so alone, like my pain was so much bigger than anything the rest of you felt, that no one could possibly understand. It took Mike coming back into my life to show me that those strange things didn't make me less, the made me *more* . That even though it's what pushed us away from each other, it's also what brought us back together in the end.

"So I'd like to propose a toast." Will raised his glass high, and those around him followed suit, their faces more sober and somber than they had been mere moments before. Across from him, Mike's eyes glittered with unshed tears, and Will held his gaze as he spoke, speaking to them all but to his boyfriend above all. The love of his life and the center of his universe. Mike Wheeler. Handsome, flawed, incredible Mike Wheeler. The best of them all.

"To the strange things that brought us together, and to the stranger things to come."

**Notes for the Chapter:**

Sorry, darlings, I'm in the midst of NaNoWriMo and won't be able to get to comments until next week! But I hope you found this a fitting end to a wonderful story. You are all superstars <3 <3

### **Author's Note:**

Hey thanks for reading :) I've been working on this fic for over a year (things kept coming up) but it's finally finished. I'll be posting one chapter once a week, usually on Saturdays. If you like what your eyes just experienced, hey, go ahead and leave a comment. I like those. And I think you'll like leaving one too. Just a hunch.